

ON ASSIGNMENT

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Breaking Up



Principal Mark Baier, center, of Mountlake Terrace (Wash.) High School is attempting to break his 1,900-student school into smaller units with a grant from the Gates Foundation.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is betting \$350 million on the creation of small high schools. All that stands in the way is decades of American tradition.

BY DAVID HILL

In 1998, school officials in the Seattle suburb of Federal Way decided the time had come to build a new high school. The 22,000-student district had not constructed a new secondary school in more than 20 years, despite having grown by 5,000 students during that time. Federal Way's three high schools each served about 1,350 students, and they were bursting at the seams. At Federal Way High School, the city's oldest, things were so bad that four lunch periods—the first beginning at 10:30 a.m.—were needed just to feed everybody.

Tom Vander Ark, the district's reform-minded superintendent, had a plan. He proposed a \$52 million bond issue to pay for additional classrooms at the three existing schools so that each could accommodate 150 more students. But he also called for the creation of a brand-new, nontraditional high school. It would serve 1,100 students, and unlike the typical large high school, with its "shopping mall" approach to education, it would focus specifically on preparing students for careers in technology. The new building would be located in downtown Federal Way, on the site of an aging alternative school that was slated to be torn down. Instead of a high-priced gymnasium, it would include a recreation center that might be open to the public. And the cost would

be just \$20 million, half the price of a traditional school. Vander Ark called the proposed facility a "new high school for a new century."

To Vander Ark, a former businessman with a reputation for taking risks, comprehensive high schools were like dinosaurs, and their extinction was inevitable. The last thing Federal Way needed to build, he believed, was another one. But, as it turned out, that's what most folks wanted. His plan quickly came under fire from a number of parents and teachers who objected to the school's career-oriented focus and feared it wouldn't effectively solve the issue of overcrowding. Some felt his proposal was simply too radical. "Is our community ready to go with this part of education reform?" asked Ann Murphy, the school board president. Apparently, the answer was no.

In the end, Vander Ark was forced to go with Plan B, a \$43 million high school with all the bells and whistles: a gym, athletic fields, a library, and science labs. The school will serve 1,350 students and is scheduled to open in the fall of 2003. The experience taught Vander Ark, who still lives in Federal Way with his wife and two daughters, a valuable lesson. "It's extraordinarily difficult to change anything in public education," he says. "In retrospect, I did a lousy job of leading that

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN LAMONT

Is Hard to Do

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process," he admits. Then he smiles and adds, "But I still think I was right."

These days, Vander Ark has bigger fish to fry. Not long after losing the Federal Way battle, he was recruited by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Seattle-based philanthropy overseen by the Microsoft Corp. chairman and his wife, for a new position: executive director for education. With assets valued at \$24.2 billion, the foundation is the wealthiest charity in the world. In April 2000, it announced that it was committing \$350 million, over a three-year period, "to help all students achieve at high levels by improving

passing through its doors every day.

But big isn't better, many critics argue. Huge, impersonal schools, they say, may work for some students—the academic stars, for example, or the top athletes—but certainly not for all, and especially not for the economically disadvantaged and students of color.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals, in *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, released in 1996, recommended that public high schools limit their enrollment to no more than 600 students, with teachers responsible for no more than 90 students during a given term. "Students take more

guided. "They deal with symptoms," he argues, "not the problem—which is that large high schools are lousy places for adults and kids."

It's a pleasant spring morning, and inside the Regency Ballroom of the Hyatt Hotel in the Seattle suburb of Bellevue, about 75 principals and teachers from 17 Washington state high schools are getting a pep talk from Vander Ark.

"We deeply appreciate your initiative and your leadership," he tells the educators, who are seated at large, round banquet tables. "This is about trying to unleash potential." A handsome man with longish brown hair and a square jaw, Vander Ark is wearing preppy-chic clothes: a blue blazer; a gray-plaid, button-down dress shirt with no tie; pressed olive-colored slacks, and brown loafers with tassels. He resembles Tony Robbins, the motivational guru, which is somehow appropriate, for one of Vander Ark's tasks is to inspire his grantees to follow through with the hard work of redesigning their high schools.

The educators in the room are grant recipients who have come to the Hyatt for a two-day Gates-sponsored conference, much of which will be devoted to small-group sessions led by Rick Lear, the director of the Gates-funded Small Schools Project at the University of Washington. "Imagine the Possibilities," reads the cover of a small black notebook given to each participant.

To qualify for Gates money—\$9 million has been earmarked for this particular effort, called the Washington State Achievers Program—the schools have promised to embark on major academic improvement and redesign efforts. In return, they will share more than \$100 million in college scholarships for low-income students over the next 13 years. Roughly two-thirds of the state's high schools were invited to apply for the grants. Interested schools

teaching and learning, and enhancing access to technology."

Given that Microsoft is the world's largest computer-software company, one might expect that access to technology would be the foundation's primary educational goal. But, in fact, that's not the case. Vander Ark and his staff of 10 hope to radically change the way people think about secondary education by encouraging the creation of small high schools—and the transformation of large schools into smaller "learning communities." To date, the Gates Foundation, which is housed (appropriately enough) in a former check-processing facility next to Seattle's Lake Union, has awarded more than \$200 million in grants—"investments," Vander Ark calls them—to push its small-schools agenda in Washington state and elsewhere. That puts the foundation at the forefront of the movement to demolish the "big is better" mentality that has long dominated high school design.

It's a difficult challenge, and Vander Ark knows it. Despite a growing belief among educators that small schools are superior, the notion of the large, comprehensive secondary school is etched in the nation's collective psyche, making it hard to imagine other possibilities. Besides, what's to be done with all those massive school buildings, some of which were built decades ago?

Musing on his experience in Federal Way, Vander Ark concedes: "I have no illusions that this is easy, and I have the scars to prove it."

More than 40 years ago, James B. Conant, a former Harvard University president, published a highly influential report titled *The American High School Today*, in which he praised large high schools. Small schools with limited resources, he argued, couldn't afford the specialized instruction in math, science, and foreign languages vital to the country's future. In fact, they represented "one of the serious obstacles to good secondary education throughout most of the United States."

Today, about 70 percent of the nation's high school students attend schools enrolling more than 1,000 students, and many go to schools with 2,000 students or more, according to the U.S. Department of Education. One of the largest is John F. Kennedy High School in New York City's Bronx borough. Built in 1972, it's like a small city, with upwards of 5,000 students

Large high schools, once seen as offering a better-quality education, are now blamed for students' isolation and disengagement from learning.

interest in school when they experience a sense of belonging," the report said.

In a review of more than 100 studies and evaluations, Kathleen Cotton, a researcher with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, recently concluded that academic achievement in small schools is at least equal—and often superior—to that of large schools. She also found that attendance is better in small schools and that students tend to drop out at a lower rate than those at large schools.

The push for smaller schools took on a greater sense of urgency after the horrific 1999 shootings at Colorado's Columbine High School. Many observers are convinced that the school's large size—almost 2,000 students—helped create an atmosphere of isolation and anonymity for some students, particularly outcasts like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the gunmen.

In the wake of recent school shootings, however, many district administrators have focused on the issue of safety rather than size, increasing the numbers of schools' security guards and metal detectors and implementing zero-tolerance policies for bullying and threats of violence. Vander Ark believes such efforts are mis-

submitted proposals outlining their plans to develop focused, smaller learning communities. They also were required to demonstrate a high level of support from faculty members and district administrators.

Tracy Van Winkle, the principal of Mariner High School in Everett, just north of Seattle, is one of the attendees. Starting next fall, her school—which serves 1,725 students—will split into six "academies," each with a different focus: Natural Resources and Science, Health and Human Services, Industrial Technology and Engineering, Business Marketing and Management, Arts and Humanities, and Communications and World Relations. The school's sports teams, however, will remain intact. "We want to maintain our identity as Mariner High School," explains Van Winkle.

Another participant is Mark Baier, the principal of Mountlake Terrace High School. His 1,900-student facility is about to undergo a similar transformation. "We're trying to reinvent what we are," he says. (Unlike the other 16 schools, Mountlake Terrace will not receive scholarship money because it doesn't have enough low-income students to qualify.)

Vander Ark, the conference's keynote speaker,

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circulates through the room without a microphone, leading the educators in a discussion of the attributes of high-achievement schools. Naturally, smallness is one of them—Vander Ark now believes that no school should serve more than 600 students, and that 400 or fewer is even better. But he cautions against dwelling on size at the expense of other, equally important, features. These include a common focus, high expectations for all students, an environment that encourages respect and responsibility, an emphasis on collaboration between staff members, a performance-based curriculum, and the use of technology as a tool for learning and assessment. (One Gates Foundation program provides individual teachers with \$9,000 worth of computer equipment and training to help their students meet high academic standards.)

Still, Vander Ark keeps coming back to school size. "It's no accident," he says, "that almost every elite private high school in this country has about 400 kids. When you get much bigger than that, all the teachers don't know all the kids." No one in the room is surprised when he says, "I hate big, comprehensive high schools."

Eventually, Vander Ark opens a book he's been clutching in his left hand. "I'd like to close with a prayer," he says before reading a poem from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. "I believe in all that has never yet been spoken. / I want to free what waits within me / so that what no one has dared to wish for / may for once spring clear / without my contriving"

It isn't every day that a former superintendent quotes German lyric poetry, but then Tom Vander Ark has always done things differently. In Federal Way, he would invite poets and preachers to enliven back-to-school rallies and staff retreats. At the foundation, he likes to begin meetings with a book report from one of his staff members.

He became interested in poetry after reading that Charles Darwin, on his death bed, voiced regret that he hadn't read poetry or listened to good music at least once a week. "Rilke," Vander Ark says, "is probably my favorite," though he confesses, "I don't understand most of what I read, but I keep trying."

"He's very much a guy's guy," Kyle Miller, an education program officer at the foundation, says of her boss. "Yet he'll use poetry to illuminate his thoughts. It's a wonderful combination."

Vander Ark, now 42, grew up in Colorado, where he graduated from Denver Christian High School—a small, private institution. A football scholarship took him to the Colorado School of Mines, where he studied mineral engineering. He earned a master's degree in business administration from the University of Denver, then went to work for Pace Membership Warehouse Inc., a Colorado-based retail co-operative. In 1994, when he was hired as the superintendent in Federal Way, he was still in his 30s and working as the director of marketing development at Cap Gemini America, an information-consulting firm. He also had become increasingly involved in the world of education, largely through his work with the Colorado Children's Campaign, a Denver-based charity that focuses on disadvantaged children. Vander Ark credits the organization's president, Barbara O'Brien, with turning him into a "missionary for kids."



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The school board in Federal Way called Vander Ark's appointment "an experiment"; and in fact, he was among the first schools chiefs in the nation recruited from the business world. One of his initial acts on the job was to convert the second-floor superintendent's office into a community center. He then claimed a windowless room on the ground floor as his own.

When Vander Ark was hired by Gates in 1999, he joined a philanthropy in transition. Bill and Melinda Gates had previously founded two charities: the William H. Gates Foundation, which was run by Gates' father and focused on global health issues, and the Gates Learning Foundation, which was established to provide computers, training, and software to the nation's neediest public libraries. Both were combined to form the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It is co-chaired by "Bill Sr.," as Gates' father is known, and Patty Stonesifer, a former Microsoft executive.

Vander Ark was brought aboard to expand the foundation's involvement in education.

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"I have no illusions that this is easy, and I have the scars to prove it."



Science teacher Jonathan Tong says he's "excited and daunted at the same time" by Mountlake Terrace's plans to redesign its programs. "What we're doing is brave," he says.

"Tom's name came up multiple times, especially in Washington state, as somebody who could bring real, practical success in working within the education system," Stonesifer said at the time. "Tom is a great combination of someone who is close to and passionate about the education system and, at the same time, a great visionary and great thinker."

For six months, he crisscrossed the country, visiting as many schools as possible and meeting with some of the nation's top education reformers. He went to the Julia Richman Education Complex in New York City, once a large, troubled institution that was transformed, seven years ago, into four small, focused high schools, a K-8 school, a school for autistic children, and a day-care center. He also visited the Minnesota New Country School, which serves just 130 students in grades 7-12. At both places, all students were meeting high academic expectations. Vander Ark concluded that small schools are much more likely to succeed because they foster positive relationships between students and adults.

During the Federal Way debacle, he had known, in his heart, that size mattered. After his trip, he was utterly convinced.

"I don't think any of them work, not for all kids," Vander Ark says of large high schools. "They're places where kids are anonymous, where teachers are anonymous. When you have a school of 1,500 students, and you have a faculty of over 100, at Christmastime the principal will still be running into teachers he forgot that he hired during the summer. Teachers fall through the cracks; kids fall through the cracks. The fac-

tory model just doesn't work anymore."

Over lunch at Daniel's Broiler, a restaurant not far from the Hyatt in Bellevue, Vander Ark is engaging but not exactly warm and fuzzy (Clearly, he's not one for small talk. In Federal Way, some considered him aloof or standoffish. "I'm a bit reserved," he says, "and that is occasionally misinterpreted.") He admits that it's much easier to create a small school from scratch than to separate an existing school into various learning communities. "It's an architectural problem," he says. But it can be done, he insists, with schools like Julia Richman serving as road maps.

Until recently, though, most of the subdivided schools were formerly big, urban institutions that, as Vander Ark puts it, had "the benefit of crisis"—meaning a majority of students were failing. Such schools often have nothing to lose by taking drastic measures. Many suburban schools, on the other hand, don't see the need to change the way they've always done business. At those institutions, it isn't hard to find fervent defenders of the status quo.

Sports boosters, for example. "The reason we have big schools in the state of Washington," Vander Ark says, "is because of sports advocates. You look at the two biggest schools in the state, and they're in relatively small districts where people have resisted building new schools because they wanted to field competitive sports teams." Yet research shows that the percentage of students involved in extracurricular activities actually declines as schools grow. "I'd much prefer to see small schools that encourage strong participation by everybody in the student body," Vander Ark says.

The academic-minded also tend to oppose change; they fear that advanced-placement and honors courses will be watered down. "Parents of the college-bound minority are con-

vinced that all is well [in large schools]," Vander Ark declares, "merely because their children are in the top 10 percent and bring home A's." Yet even those students can get lost in the shuffle. And if they're doing well academically, it is despite the size of their school, not because of it, he argues.

Then there's the money issue. Vander Ark estimates that it costs about \$1 million for a large, comprehensive high school to plan and implement a major redesign effort. And, in theory, once you split a big school into smaller ones, you need more administrators. That assumption has kept many districts from seriously considering change. But Vander Ark claims that the old "economies of scale" argument doesn't always hold up.

"In large schools," he says, "you actually have

pockets of kids who are very invested in a particular teacher or a particular program. But we also have a lot of kids who aren't invested in the school at all."

A number of classes at Terrace, he points out, are what he calls "singletons"—they last for just one trimester, or 12 weeks. "Theoretically," he says, "a student could have 18 different teachers" during the school year. "Now, I don't think that's ever happened, but it could. And it illustrates the point that, in our effort to provide kids with curricular choices, we've disconnected them from school a little bit. They're not building relationships with anybody."

To mitigate the problem, the school has added more yearlong classes. "But kids in this building," Baier says, "can see a lot of different

Others at Terrace agree the school is too big. "I see kids every day whom I don't recognize," says Assistant Principal Paul Tytler. "I think, 'Boy, I don't know who you are. Do you go to school here?' And that doesn't feel good."

Last January, Terrace applied for a three-year, \$833,000 grant from the Gates Foundation to restructure the school. Two months later, it won the grant, and 87 percent of faculty members voted to accept it. The money will pay for professional development, additional salaries to cover the many hours needed to redesign the school, and technology. (Because the foundation wants the school to have a student-to-computer ratio of 4-to-1, some of the grant money will go toward new computers and software.)

In May, the faculty voted to go with a model that will create several academies—the themes and exact number have yet to be determined—for all 9th and 10th graders. However, 11th and 12th graders will be allowed to take specialty classes outside their designated academies. "There was a lot of support for this model," Baier says, "because it preserved the integrity and the autonomy of the smaller learning communities, but at the same time it provided some flexibility for kids to take the courses they need."

Still, many questions remain. How will students be selected? Or will they get to choose which academy they want to attend? What will happen to the music program? The sports teams? School spirit?

Baier also worries about extra costs. For instance, more computers means more repairs, yet technological support isn't covered by the Gates grant. And although there are no plans to hire additional staff members once Terrace is redesigned, Baier wonders if that may change—and where the money will come from to pay for new salaries. (The district supports Terrace's redesign plans but hasn't promised to fork over more money.) "This is not an easy process," Baier concedes.

Science teacher Jonathan Tong admits to being "excited and daunted at the same time" by the redesign efforts. Finishing up a lunch of fried chicken in the teachers' lounge, he says: "It's exciting that we've chosen to do something

diseconomies of scale. For instance, you have to have a registrar for students—but not at a small school. And you have a number of counselors, an athletic director, security people, support staff." At small schools, he explains, it's possible for teachers to wear more than one hat, eliminating the need for some administrative positions.

"Some argue that small schools cost a bit more to operate," he adds, "but thousands operate on the same per-pupil funding as other schools in the same system."

Many people remain unconvinced. "There's something in this effort to break big schools up," Vander Ark says, "that will upset just about everybody."

Mountlake Terrace High School is a handsome, brown-brick complex surrounded by lush, green athletic fields. Located just north of Seattle, the suburban high school—one of five in the Edmonds school district—serves about 1,900 predominantly white, middle-class students. (Only 16 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.) Terrace, as it is called, opened in 1960, but the original building was replaced in 1991 by a sprawling, 215,000-square-foot facility, complete with a large theater, 50 classrooms, two art rooms, two music rooms, and a 10,000-square-foot gymnasium that seats 2,000 spectators.

Like many large high schools, Terrace, which employs 95 teachers, is able to offer its students a smorgasbord of classes and extracurricular activities. The school's 42-page "academic planning guide" looks more like a college catalog, with brief descriptions of such courses as Contemporary World Problems, Cooking Around the World, History of Rock and Roll, Japanese, Marine Biology, Percussion Ensemble, Printmaking, Sports Medicine, Women in Literature, and Zoology. The school is proud of its award-winning newspaper, the *Hawkeye*, and its band program is considered one of the best in the state. Glass cases throughout the school contain dozens of sports trophies.

Clearly, Terrace has a lot going for it. Some students are doing well. Sitting at a table in his office, Mark Baier, the school's 50-year-old principal, observes: "We have, like all high schools,

Mountlake Terrace High School has too many students for whom "apathy is their daily companion," Principal Mark Baier says.

adults during their high school career. And for some kids, that's not a bad thing. Those goal-oriented, motivated kids—they can handle that kind of change and turnover. But a lot of kids out there would really benefit from having longer relationships with teachers."

Academically, Terrace is, by most measures, slightly below average. "We have too many students, especially in the 9th and 10th grades, who are failing classes," Baier wrote in a message posted on the school's Web site last spring. "We have too many students for whom apathy is their daily companion, who complain not that the work is too hard but that it does not connect with anything useful in their lives. We have too many students who do not have one meaningful conversation with an adult every day. We have special education students and English-as-a-second-language students who struggle with the most basic curriculum but who are also expected to meet high standards."

that most every other school in the country knows is the right thing to do, but they're afraid to do it—because they know how much work and how much time it's going to take to change things. So, in that sense, what we're doing is brave."

The Gates Foundation had expected the school to implement at least some changes by next fall, but after two summer planning workshops, Baier is shooting for 2003. In the end, though, the principal is convinced that Terrace will be a better place. "It's hard to believe," he says, "that this isn't going to have a significant impact on our school."

For his part, Tom Vander Ark remains hopeful. "We want to be thoughtful about what we do," he says, sounding realistic. "We hope it's important work. We hope it demonstrates what's possible. ... Our current paradigm of what secondary education looks like is these giant comprehensive schools. Maybe we can change that by the end of the decade." ■