

The Friday Missive



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Downsizing – The Small School Movement

In 1992, William Fowler said, “There is a natural predilection in American education toward enormity, and it does not serve schools well.” More recently, Rotherham (1999) argued that “Smaller, more autonomous, flexible, and accountable schools should characterize education in the next century”

Since World War Two, the number of schools in the United States has declined by 70 percent, while the average size has increased fivefold. At the present time twenty five percent of secondary schools have more than 1,000 students; in New York City there are nine schools with more than 4,000 students. The largest is John F. Kennedy High School with 5,300. To the best of my knowledge we have not let this happen here, but the school that I last led steadily grew to over 1,800 students and it was not the largest in the land.

I always believed that the advantages of larger schools are that they offer economies of scale in terms of lower costs per student, and that they have the capacity to offer a more varied and high quality curriculum. I now believe that these economies of scale may be penalties of scale because they require more layers of support and more bureaucracy. Some research that I carried out in Manchester showed that the larger schools, whilst seemingly being effective in terms of 5'A*-C' (I refused to take into account GNVQ's!) were not producing the highest overall value added scores. The highest scores were being produced by some of the city's smallest schools.

For me, there is some evidence that indicates that when pupil costs are calculated on the number of pupils who gain 5'A*-C' rather than on the number served, these so called savings in large schools begin to disappear. What about the 'costs' to the students who attend large schools? These can often materialise as lower levels of achievement, especially from those who lie in the mid-ability range, less involvement in extra-curricular activities in terms of overall percentage of the student body, and more problems relating to safety in terms of overcrowding. Yet despite this, these schools are popular with parents and invariably over-subscribed.

So, what constitutes a small school? Recent research, in the U.S.A., on the effect of school size on student achievement indicates that a small school strategy may be a powerful school improvement model. While there is no single definition of “smallness,” some research indicates that an effective size

for an elementary school is in the range of 300-400 students and that 400-800 students is appropriate for a secondary school (Cotton, 1996). Lee and Smith (1996) argue that slightly larger secondary schools, from 600-900 students, are necessary for good curricular diversity. On the other hand, small school advocates such as Deborah Meier and Ted Sizer of the Coalition of Essential Schools, believe that no secondary school should exceed 300 students (Cushman, 1997).

Some large schools are now moving to a small school model by dividing an existing large school building into two or more smaller, autonomous schools. This has been done in Chicago, New York City, Philadelphia, and numerous other locations. Different buildings or corridors are being utilised to house several small schools under the one 'roof'.

Why is this happening? What are the benefits? For both elementary and secondary students of all ability levels and in all kinds of settings, research has repeatedly found small schools to be superior to large schools on most measures and equal to them on the rest.

In 1993, Cotton examined 103 studies concerning the relationship of school size to various aspects of schooling. His conclusions were:

- Academic achievement in small schools was at least equal, and often superior, to that of large schools. The effects of small schools on the achievement of ethnic minority students and students of low socioeconomic status being the most positive of all.
- Student attitudes toward school in general and toward particular school subjects were more positive in small schools.
- Student social behaviour, as measured by truancy levels, discipline problems, violence, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation, was more positive in small schools.
- Levels of extracurricular participation were much higher and more varied in small schools than large ones.
- Student attendance was better in small schools than in large ones, especially with minority or poor students.
- A smaller percentage of students dropped out of small schools than large ones.
- Students had a greater sense of belonging in small schools than in large ones. Interpersonal relations between and among students, teachers, and administrators were more positive in small schools than in large ones.
- Students' academic and general self-regard was higher in small schools than in large schools.
- Students from small and large high schools performed comparably on college-related variables, such as grades, admissions, and graduation rates.
- Despite the common belief that larger schools had higher quality curricula than small schools, no reliable relationship existed between school size and curriculum quality.

- Larger schools were not necessarily less expensive to operate than small schools. Small high schools cost more money only if one tried to maintain the big-school infrastructure (e.g., a large bureaucracy).

In 1997, Strange found increasing evidence that school size and poverty interacted to affect student achievement. Findings from Alaska, California and West Virginia indicated that:

- Larger schools moderately benefited affluent students, compared to smaller schools, but they increased the negative effect of poverty on the educational achievement of poor students.
- The benefit of small schools for poor children was much greater than the benefit of large schools for rich children.

This research indicated that large schools not only hurt poor students, but actually increased the educational gap between wealthy and poor children.

Researchers long have reported that the strongest predictor of student success or failure is the social condition in which children and families live. Schools cannot change these conditions; however, they can take steps to ameliorate the effects of poverty and related circumstances which affect so many children. For example, Maeroff (1998) and others pointed out that small school size, in which adults can give more attention to each student, can help to address the fact that so many students come to school lacking in 'social capital.'

The challenge for schools in this country who wish to re-size is how to proceed. How can we preserve a broad, balanced subject based curriculum if we are to try to introduce the benefits of 'small schooling'? I see very few B.S.F. schemes that are looking at producing a series of clustered buildings. I am not sure that our present 'larger' schools have sufficient corridors to produce individual small schools.

A further challenge is how you group the pupils in the school. Remember the purpose of the 'small school' is to produce a group of teachers who would have both academic and pastoral responsibility for that school. I am not confident that you could use vertical grouping across all five years as your small school model. How would you offer an option system with only sixty, or perhaps even fewer pupils in your year 11? You would have to merge several of the smaller units together and that would defeat the very purpose of having a small school model.

If we are to proceed with a 'small school' model, and I hope that we do, then I suspect horizontal groupings will become the basis for our small schools, with the majority of the curriculum being delivered by a team of teachers dedicated to that year group. A six-form entry school could produce three Y7 – Y9 schools in Key Stage 3 with a further two in Key Stage 4. I suspect that this would have the added advantage of allowing assessment when ready rather than by our outmoded concept of assessment by age.

A big question still remains regarding the career aspirations of our present subject specialists who want to teach across a variety of year groups. Whilst I do not have the answer, I am beginning to think that universities and schools of education may be the place to start the revolution. If the research is to be accepted, then perhaps we are producing the wrong type of teacher for the success of our urban children.

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