

					the greater of the division average per-pupil cost of all divisions or the actual division per - pupil cost. Local districts must provide matching funds based on the composite index of local ability to pay. State Board of Ed. to budget accordingly.
WI	voluntary/ grants 1995 Act 27 Chapter 118.43	1995	Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE); districts eligible to enter 5-year achievement guarantee contract with Dept. of Public Instr. on behalf of one school if minimum of 30% low-income students and no preschool-grade 5 grant on behalf of that school. (Also implements curricular and programmatic req's.)	Targets K, 1st grade in 98-99; adds grade 2 in 99-2000; adds grade 3 in 2001-2003. Class size reduction is one of several reqmts. for grants; schools must also extend hours of operation, provide rigorous curriculum, create staff development and accountability programs and pass annual review.	Finance formula funds reduction in class size to 1: 15 in each SAGE classroom.

Small Class Sizes:

Discussion, Rationale, Evidence

The debate over the effectiveness and efficiency of reducing class size remains unresolved. Nonetheless, several state legislatures are appropriating large sums of money to reduce K-3 class sizes to between 15 and 20 students.

Researchers keep the discussion alive as they argue about the merits and methodologies of various class-size studies. For state policymakers, reducing class size is a visible, concrete initiative that can be replicated throughout schools. Meanwhile, teachers and parents proclaim what they see as obvious -- fewer students in a class makes it easier to teach and to learn. In the end, state leaders must weigh the "political points" they earn from teachers and parents against the high cost of reducing class size and the education reforms left unfunded because of this policy.

The class-size reduction discussion intensified in 1990 when the Tennessee legislature funded a longitudinal study on smaller classes and student achievement, and then commissioned a follow-up study to determine the lasting benefits. The first study, known as Project STAR (Student Teacher Achievement Ratio) studied 7,000 students in 79 elementary schools. Researchers concluded that small class sizes (13-17 students) significantly increased student achievement scores, compared to regular classes of 22 to 25 and regular classes with a full-time teacher's aide. They also found that gains made in kindergarten were maintained through 3rd grade and the greatest gains were made in inner-city small classes.

Tennessee's second analysis, the Lasting Benefits Study, tracked students from grades 4-7 as they returned to normal size classes and concluded these students:

Were less frequently retained in grade
Succeeded in narrowing the achievement gap between children living in poverty and more affluent students, and between white and African-American students
Had higher achievement "across the board" (in science, social studies, math, reading, spelling and study skills)
Continued to outscore peers from larger classes; however, differences diminished somewhat as years went on

While the results from these two studies appear convincing, critics point out that 1,100 small-class size studies produced mixed findings. They also question whether Project STAR and the Lasting Benefits Study should be viewed as the definitive studies on which to develop and invest in class-size reduction policies.

Overall, the evidence is inconclusive as to whether small classes improve student achievement. The research has produced mixed and contradictory results, including:

Students in early grades learn more and continue to have an edge over the rest of their peers when they return to normal classrooms. The impact is greatest and longer-lasting if they remain in small classes, however.

The payoff in terms of student achievement gains does not translate into a cost-effective investment. Tutoring and direct instruction appear to be more cost-effective.

Kindergarten through 3rd grade students benefit most, as do minority students in urban schools

Class-size reduction cannot be isolated as the sole factor for increased student achievement

Reading and math scores improve for some students in comparison to peers in regular-size classes

Smaller classes force districts to hire significantly more teachers and create more classroom space
Effectiveness depends on whether teachers adapt their teaching methods to take advantage of small classes and have more focused time with students

Small classes result in fewer classroom distractions and more time for teachers to devote to each student

Characteristics of High-Quality Initiatives

Reducing class size is most effective when:

Classes are reduced to between 15 and 19 students. (Little impact has been demonstrated in class sizes of 20 to 40 students.)

Particular schools are targeted, especially those with low-achieving and low-income students

Teachers are provided ongoing, high-quality professional development to make the most of the smaller class size conditions

Teachers are well-qualified and a challenging curriculum is used for every student

Actions for Policymakers

If state policymakers decide to invest in class-size reduction, they may want to consider the following actions:

Estimate the cost of funding the proposed class-size reduction plan, then:

- Determine the state's commitment and any district contribution that will be necessary
- Indicate whether state funding is permanent, temporary or contingent upon available revenue
- Address the need for additional, qualified teachers and classroom space
- Provide sufficient funds for the grades and schools covered under the initiative

Target the program and dollars to low-income, low-achieving schools to allow significant class-size reduction in a few schools, rather than modest reductions statewide.

Provide professional development funds so teachers can adapt their teaching methods for the smaller classes

Evaluate the small class-size initiative on a regular basis to determine its benefits and cost-effectiveness

Assist schools and districts to combine class-size reduction with other school-improvement plans for maximum impact

Comments to Policymakers

As more states adopt or consider legislation to reduce class size, the discussion should focus on the costs of creating smaller classes and whether the costs are justified by the returns. Moreover, if class size is believed to make a difference, then policymakers need better information about why small classes are beneficial to student achievement and how this information can be used for other reform efforts. Finally, state leaders should be prepared to deal with the unintended consequences if class size is reduced on a statewide scale; for example, the need for additional, qualified teachers and classroom space and the issue of teachers choosing more desirable districts.

Suggestions for Evaluation: California Example

The following was adapted from *Report to the State Board of Education: A Plan for the Evaluation of California's Class Size Reduction Initiative* 10/20/97.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE CLASS SIZE REDUCTION PROGRAM

The Class Size Reduction program (CSR) consortium proposed a research plan to find information on many topics, broken into seven categories. The answers to some of these questions will come from data (test scores, for example), while many others will require observations, surveys, and conversations with policymakers, teachers and administrators, and parents.

Policymaking at the state, district, and school levels

What are policymakers' goals and expectation for CSR? Their concerns?

Do they have common expectations about the influence on student learning? Do these match or differ from teachers' or school boards' expectations.

How do educational policies, regulations, and labor agreements help or hinder implementation?

Resource allocation within and among schools

What is the effect on districts' revenues and expenditures? on spending for school operations and facilities, across grades, for instructional support services and programs? on resources across primary and secondary schools and across district programs?

How did schools find space for new classrooms? If there were tradeoffs, what were they and are they permanent?

How does CSR money affect equity of funding among districts, schools, and groups of students given the different resources already available to districts?

Intersection with other education reforms

What is the relationship between CSR and large categorical programs (Special Education, Title 1) and programs for English learners?

Do district or school characteristics (high or low revenue, for example) affect implementation?

Is CSR integrated with a district's master plan? or existing reform efforts? What interaction, if any, will there be with new state curriculum standards?

Does CSR intersect with other reform efforts, or is it a diversion?

Teacher quality, assignment, and training

What is the impact of CSR on recruiting and assigning teachers? What is the influence of collective bargaining?

What are the qualifications and experience of teachers in the smaller classes and in classes with limited-English or minority or special-needs students?

What professional development and support do teachers get? Does it change according to their

experience? Does it vary by district?

What do teachers report about their satisfaction and attitudes as a consequence of CSR? How do these affect student learning?

Classroom practices

How has CSR affected teaching practices?

What methods of instruction are used for English language learners in CSR classes? Does instruction differ across districts, classrooms, or categories of students?

How is the classroom atmosphere changed?

What is the impact on personnel to support teachers?

Student outcomes

Has achievement in reading and math improved? Has promotion, retention changed? What do the next grade teachers report?

Have transitions into or out of special programs changed?

What is the impact on students' attendance, behavior, completing homework?

Are English language learners ready to read sooner?

Do student outcomes vary according to school, teacher, classroom practices, or the characteristics of the student?

Have changes in classroom practices affected student outcomes?

Parental involvement

How have parents been involved in decisions about participation, allocation of resources and space, and pupil assignments?

Are parents more directly involved with their child's teacher or in the classroom?

Do they believe their children's education is improved? Is there a change in their satisfaction with teachers, the school, or the district? Do they think the total school program has improved?

Have parent involvement programs grown or declined? Parent participation?

This last segment used with permission: EdSource, *Evaluating California's Class Size Reduction Program*, February 1998. To order the evaluation, send \$4 plus \$1 shipping and handling to:

EdSource, 4151 Middlefield Road, Suite 100, Palo Alto, CA 94303-4743. 650/857-9604 phone 650/857-9618 fax;
www.edsource.org

Clearinghouse Notes are multi-state policy compilations.

© Copyright 1998 by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). All rights reserved.

The Education Commission of the States is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact formed in 1965. The primary purpose of the commission is to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education at all levels. Forty-nine states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are members. It is ECS policy to take affirmative action to prevent discrimination in its policies, programs and employment practices.

ECS is pleased to have other organizations or individuals share its materials with their constituents. To request permission to reproduce or excerpt part of this publication, please write or fax Josie Canales, ECS, 707 17th St., Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427; fax: 303-296-8332.

COMMENTS

SEARCH

Copyright © 1999 by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). All Rights Reserved.

Education Commission of the States ■ 707 17th St., #2700 Denver, CO 80202-3427
303-299-3600 ■ FAX: 303-296-8332 ■ E-mail: ecs@ecs.org ■ Internet: www.ecs.org



Class Size and Students At Risk

What is Known?
What is Next?

April 1998

*Very lengthy,
may not need*

Table of Contents

Title Page

- Foreword
- About the Author
- Acknowledgments
- Introduction
- Research on the Academic Effects of Small Class Size
 - Overviews of Research on Small Classes
 - Statewide Class-size Studies: PRIME TIME and STAR
- Assessing the Costs and Benefits of Smaller Classes
 - Educational Production Functions
 - Cost Analyses
 - Further Work
- Instructional Practice and Student Behavior
 - Student Engagement
 - Engagement and Students At Risk
 - Teacher and Pupil Behavior in Small Classes
 - Other Outcomes
 - Summary
- Research Priorities
 - Issue 1: Short-Term and Long-Range Effects of Small Classes for Students At Risk
 - Issue 2: Teaching Practices to Maximize the Effectiveness of Small Classes
 - Issue 3: School and Classroom Conditions That Interact With Class Size
 - Issue 4: Small Classes and Positive "Long-Term Trajectories" for Students At Risk
 - Issue 5: Assessing the Costs of a Small-Class Initiative
- References

For the user's convenience, this publication is also available in portable document format (pdf) [74K]. To read pdf files you will need Adobe's Acrobat Reader; if you do not have Acrobat Reader you can download a free copy from Adobe.



[Return to Publications page](#)

Class Size and Students At Risk: What is Known?...What is Next? - April 1998

Introduction

It is a propitious time with regard to questions about class size. After years of debate, speculation, and research that yielded only partial and less-than-definitive answers, a major longitudinal study provides answers to the question "Do small classes result in greater academic achievement in the elementary grades?" Begun in 1985, Tennessee's Project STAR (Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio) set the stage for asking and answering a number of policy questions that could not be addressed before.

The first chapter of this paper reviews the status of research on class size with particular attention to the STAR investigation and to the research spawned by STAR. The conclusiveness of the findings are discussed as well as implications for students at risk and for education policy in general. The second chapter discusses approaches that have been taken to assess the costs and benefits of reducing class size and proposes additional dimensions that need to be considered; and the third explores the implications of small class size for classroom management and instructional strategies, with particular attention to the need to increase the academic engagement of students at risk. Issues requiring further research are identified throughout the paper. In the last chapter, however, these are summarized as a "research agenda" with priorities for further work.

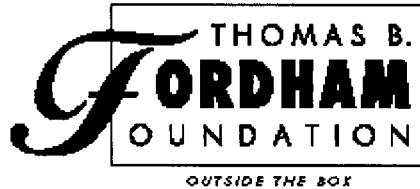
This review and research agenda focus largely on the effects of small classes in the early grades. There are two reasons for this. First, the most current (and best) research to date has been conducted in kindergarten through grade 3. The state of research with respect to small classes in the upper grades is fragmented and even contradictory, leaving little to say that is based on substantive research results. Second, there are good reasons for starting research and intervention projects in the early grades. The assumption that the early years lay the foundation for much that follows is explicit throughout this review and has been substantiated repeatedly by research in the social sciences.

-###-

[Acknowledgements]



[Research on the Academic Effects of Small Class Size]



Conservative
View

Eric Hanushek's "The Evidence on Class Size" is available in pdf format. To view this document, you must use *Adobe Acrobat Reader 3.0*. [Click here](#) to download this free software.

Below is a summary of the report. This summary is also available in pdf format, complete with charts and graphs.

The Evidence on Class Size

Eric A. Hanushek
University of Rochester

Executive Summary

A wave of enthusiasm for reducing class size is sweeping across the country. This move appears misguided. The primary conclusion of this paper is:

Existing evidence indicates that achievement for the typical student will be unaffected by instituting the types of class size reductions that have been recently proposed or undertaken. The most noticeable feature of policies to reduce overall class sizes will be a dramatic increase in the costs of schooling, an increase unaccompanied by achievement gains.

This conclusion is frequently greeted with surprise, but it should not be. Class sizes have been reduced over a long period of time with no evidence of overall achievement gains. Moreover, the effects of class size have been studied more intensively than any other aspect of schools, and this extensive research simply does not offer support for the types of policies to reduce class size that have been proposed. Broadly reducing class sizes is extraordinarily expensive and, based on years of research and experience, very ineffective.

There are powerful reasons for us as a Nation to expand and improve investment in human capital. The strength and vitality of our economy depends importantly on having a skilled workforce that can compete in the international economy. Acknowledging the need for investment does not, however, lead to unqualified support for any policies labeled "investment in our youth" or "school improvement." Recent policy discussions have been laced with programs that fundamentally involve haphazard and ineffective spending on schools and that offer little hope for gains in achievement. The current set of class size proposals falls into this category.

People supporting broad class size reductions generally point to a few studies or a few experiences that suggest improved performance with smaller classes and then rely on the "obviousness" of the proposed policies to carry the day. A thorough review of the scientific evidence provides no support for broad programs of class size reduction.

1. We have extensive experience with class size reduction and it has NOT worked.

Between 1950 and 1995, pupil-teacher ratios fell by 35 percent. While we do not

have information about student achievement for this entire period, the information that we have from 1970 for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that our 17-year-olds were performing roughly the same in 1996 as in 1970. There are some differences by subject area, but the overall picture is one of stagnant performance.

The aggregate trends cannot be explained away by a worsening of students over time. While some family factors have worsened – increased child poverty and fewer two parent families, others have improved – more educated parents and smaller families. Nor does appeal to the mandated increases in budgets for special education explain the ineffectiveness of past reductions in class size and increases in spending. Even though special education is more expensive than regular education and even though it is an increasingly important issue, it simply is not large enough to rationalize past resource growth.

2. International experience suggests NO relationship between pupil-teacher ratios and student performance.

Dramatic differences in pupil-teacher ratios and in class sizes across countries are unrelated to measures of mathematics and science achievement. While there are many differences across countries that are difficult to adjust for in any analysis, there are also large differences in pupil-teacher ratios. These differences hold the possibility of understanding the effects of class size on performance, but – quite surprisingly – the international differences suggest a slight positive relationship between pupil-teacher ratios and student achievement.

3. Extensive econometric investigation show NO relationship between class size and student performance.

Extensive statistical investigation of the relationship between class size and student performance shows as many positive as negative estimates. With close to 300 separate estimates of the effect of class size, there is no reason to expect performance improvements from lowering class sizes. Moreover, because of the controversial nature of these conclusions, they have been carefully scrutinized – and the policy conclusions remain unaffected.

These studies are important because they provide detailed views of differences across classrooms – views that separate the influence of schools from that of family, peers, and other factors. As a group, they cover the influence of class size on a variety of student outcomes, on performance at different grades, and on achievement in different kinds of schools and different areas of the country. In sum, they provide broad and solid evidence.

4. Project STAR in Tennessee does NOT support overall reductions in class size except perhaps at kindergarten.

Much of the current enthusiasm for reductions in class size is supported by references to the results of a random-assignment experimental program in the State of Tennessee in the mid 1980s. The common reference to this program, Project STAR, is an assertion that the positive results there justify a variety of overall reductions in class size.

The study is conceptually simple, even if some questions about its actual implementation remain. Students in the STAR experiment were randomly assigned to small classes (13-17 students) or large classes (21-25 students with or without aides). They were kept in these small or large classes from kindergarten through third grade, and their achievement was measured at the end of each year.

If smaller classes were valuable in each grade, the achievement gap would widen. It does not. In fact, the gap remains essentially unchanged through the sixth grade, even

though the experimental students from the small classes return to larger classes for the fourth through sixth grades. The inescapable conclusion is that the smaller classes at best matter in kindergarten.

The STAR data suggest that perhaps achievement would improve if kindergarten classes were moved to sizes considerably below today's average. The data do not suggest that improvements will result from class size reductions at later grades. Nor do they suggest that more modest reductions, say to 18 or 20 students per class, will yield achievement gains. The STAR evidence pertains to a one-third reduction in class sizes, a reduction approximately equal to the overall decline in pupil-teacher between 1950 and today.

5. The quality of the teacher is much more important than class size.

Considerable evidence shows that by far the largest differences in the impact of schools on student achievement relate to differences in the quality of teachers. Thus, whether or not large-scale reductions in class sizes help or hurt will depend mostly on whether or not any new teachers are better or worse than the existing teachers. Unfortunately, the current organization of schools and incentives to hire and retain teachers do little to ensure that the teacher force will improve. Simply grafting on different certification requirements are also unlikely to work. If we are to have a real impact on teaching, we must evaluate actual teaching performance and use such evaluations in school decisions. We cannot rely on requirements for entry, but must switch to using actual performance in the classroom.

6. While silver bullets do not exist, far superior approaches are available.

The states and federal government are in a unique position to initiate programs that promise true improvement in our schools. They are not programs that mandate or push local schools to adopt particular approaches – such as lowering overall class sizes or altering the certification of teachers. Instead they are programs that develop information about improved incentives in schools.

The largest impediment to any constructive change in schools is that nobody in today's schools has much of an incentive to improve student performance. Careers simply are not made on the basis of student outcomes. The flow of resources is not related positively to performance – indeed it is more likely to be perversely related to performance. The unfortunate fact is, however, that we have little experience with alternative incentive structures.

A very productive use of state and federal funds would be to conduct a series of planned interventions that could be used to evaluate improvements. Minimally, instead of funding lowered class sizes everywhere, the states and federal government could team together to mandate more extensive random-assignment trials and evaluation of the benefits of lowered class sizes, à la Tennessee. More usefully, they could work to develop a series of experiments that investigate the construction and implementation of alternative incentive schemes – from merit pay to private contracting to wider choice of schools. Much of our knowledge about treatment therapies in medicine is directly related to prior experimentation. The last period of social experimentation by the federal government during the 1960s and 1970s produced many useful policy insights. A new program of trials with altered performance incentives could place an indelible positive stamp on the Nation's future by committing to learning about how schools can be improved. Today we do not know enough to develop an effective program of improvement. Nor will continuation of past research programs help, because they must rely upon the existing structure of schools with the existing incentives (or lack of incentives).

Eric Hanushek is a Professor of Economics and Public Policy at the

General News Articles

HRC Involvement/
Events and Columns

Clinton Presidential Records Digital Records Marker

This is not a presidential record. This is used as an administrative marker by the William J. Clinton Presidential Library Staff.

This marker identifies the place of a tabbed divider. Given our digitization capabilities, we are sometimes unable to adequately scan such dividers. The title from the original document is indicated below.

<Blank>

Divider Title: _____

School Size

- I. Administration Position**
 - Accomplishments Document
- II. Department of Education/ Programs and Policies**
- III. ESEA**
 - Title X: Reforming America's High Schools
- IV. NEA/AFT**
- V. Studies**
 - ACSD/ Synthesis of Research/ Small Schools: A Reform That Works (1/98)
 - ERIC/ Ongoing Dilemmas of School Size: A Short Story
- VI. General News Articles**
 - Think Small/ Ed Week Quality Counts 98
 - "When It Comes to School Size, Smaller is Better"* (2/24/99)
 - "Small Schools Offer A More Nurturing Environment "* (5/18/99)
 - "Are Bigger Schools Better"* (5/9/99)
 - "Assembly Lines for Alienated Teens"* (5/13/99)
 - "Being Small Can be Good for Schools"* (4/4/99)
 - "On the Virtues of Smallness"* (4/25/99)
 - "For Highs Schools, Small is Beautiful"* (5/29/99)
- VII. HRC Involvement/ Events and Columns**

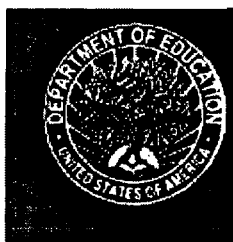
Administration Position \

CLINTON/GORE ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN EDUCATION SCHOOL SIZE

- While the Administration has chosen to focus its' efforts on class size rather than school size, there is a proposal within ESEA that suggests providing federal grants to help transform 5,000 American high schools "into places where students receive individualized attention." It is suggested that this be achieved through the creation of smaller secondary schools and schools-within-schools—existing schools divided up into several more-or-less autonomous units.
- In a May 16 commencement address to Graceland College, the Vice President recommended distributing federal incentives [modeled on challenge grants] to encourage local school districts to build small high schools or create "schools within schools."
- When Secretary Riley recently called in experts on school security to discuss how to make schools safer, their top recommendation was to shrink the size of schools.

Department of Education
Programs and Policies

ESEA



➤ Reauthorization
Home

➤ Fact Sheet

➤ Prospectus:
Title-by-Title
Description

➤ Publications on
ESEA Programs



TITLE X REFORMING AMERICA'S HIGH SCHOOLS

"People who work hard still need support to get ahead in the new economy. They need education and training for a lifetime...More and more Americans are finding that the education of their childhood simply doesn't last a lifetime."

President Clinton
January 23, 1996

In the 21st century, all high school students will need to obtain the academic foundations needed for further education and training to succeed in an economy that is increasingly characterized by global competition and evolving technologies. Given their unique organizational structures and roles as gateways to colleges and careers, high schools must not only prepare students academically, they must support their personal and interpersonal growth during a critical transition stage in students' lives.

High schools are increasingly places where students feel disconnected from adults. Research shows that when students feel connected to school and their parents, they are less likely than other adolescents to engage in unhealthy, inappropriate behavior. Since 1996, the Department's New American High Schools initiative has recognized high schools that are using innovative approaches to prepare students to meet the challenges of the future. While the New American High Schools initiative has provided some evidence for promoting effective reform, more work is needed to expand the number of high schools undertaking changes, particularly among those that serve large numbers of students from low-income families.

The Administration's proposal to reauthorize the ESEA would:

- **Support effective educational reforms in American high schools**, particularly in urban and rural high schools that educate concentrations of students from low-income families, in order to meet the needs of students at risk of failing to achieve. Our proposal would support high school efforts to strengthen curriculum and instruction, improve Title I schoolwide high school programs, offer extended learning opportunities to students and provide high-quality professional development opportunities to school staff. It would also support reforms that ensure that students receive individualized attention through smaller learning environments.
- **Promote research-based, schoolwide reforms.** The New American High School Initiative showcase sites demonstrate that standards-based, locally driven reforms in high schools are associated with improvement in attendance and graduation rates. Additionally, since states began strengthening graduation requirements, more high school students are completing challenging math courses. Our reauthorization proposal supports reforms that create smaller learning environments that motivate students; challenge all students to

meet high state standards; and motivate students to learn, for example, through applied learning.

- **Experiment with incentive awards for teachers and administrators who improve student achievement.** Under our proposal, the Department would select schools to participate in an experimental incentive program. Teachers and administrators in participating schools whose students showed progress on multiple measures would receive rewards.
- **Increase the national knowledge base on effective high school reforms** by identifying the most effective approaches and disseminating information on them to encourage their use nationally.

~~###~~

[Title VII]    [Title X Foreign Language Instruction]

This page last modified on June 11, 1999 (jls)

*The Educational Excellence for All Children Act of 1999***Title X, Part H — High School Reform****What's New**

The Educational Excellence for All Children Act of 1999:

- Supports effective educational reforms in 5,000 American high schools by the year 2007 by helping high schools in urban and rural districts that educate students from low-income families help students by strengthening curriculum and instruction, improving Title I schoolwide programs, and providing enhanced professional development opportunities for school staff;
- Promote research-based, schoolwide reforms to challenge all students to meet high state standards, such as ensuring that students receive individualized attention and are motivated to learn;
- Promote safer, more supportive schools by encouraging smaller learning environments (such as schools within schools), involving members of the community, and creating partnerships with other institutions;
- Experiment with incentive awards for teachers and administrators who improve student achievement; and
- Encourage the adoption of successful high school reform strategies by recognizing high schools that show outstanding results, disseminating information on best practices, and creating networks of participating school districts to foster communication and collaboration.

Given their unique organizational roles as gateways to college and careers and their often large and anonymous environments, secondary schools merit special attention. Our reauthorization proposal would support the development and implementation of effective educational reforms in high schools, particularly those that educate concentrations of students from low-income families. It establishes the goal that at least 5,000 American high schools — half of all high schools — will have implemented comprehensive reforms by the year 2007.

What We've Learned

In the 21st century, high schools must help all students succeed in college and prepare themselves for careers in an economy that is increasingly dominated by global competition and constantly changing technology. To be effective, high schools must not only prepare students academically, they must support adolescents' personal and interpersonal growth during this critical time in their lives.

It is not at all clear that high schools are meeting the academic and developmental challenges of students. For example:

- Only 78 percent of all Americans between the ages of 25 and 29 have graduated from high school, although an additional 11 percent earned a general equivalency diploma. Almost half of the 78 percent of students who do graduate from high school are not able to complete college or climb a career ladder from an entry-level job.

- On an international assessment of math and science skills released in February 1998 — the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) — American twelfth-graders outperformed students from only 2 (Cyprus and South Africa) of the 21 other participating countries.
- Math and science scores of American 17-year-olds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are on a long-term decline, despite recent gains. The average science score in 1996 was lower than the 1969 average, and the average math score in 1996 was not significantly different from the 1973 average.
- Recently released NAEP scores in reading among twelfth-graders indicate improvement among our higher-achieving students but not among the lowest-achieving students.
- High schools are increasingly larger places where students feel disconnected from adults, particularly in urban and suburban areas. Research shows that when students feel connected to school and to their parents, they are less likely than other adolescents to suffer from emotional distress, have suicidal thoughts and behaviors, use violence, and smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or smoke marijuana.
- The problems facing high schools are particularly prevalent in schools that enroll concentrations of minority students and students from low-income families. Because of changes made by the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, high schools now receive significantly more Title I funding than was the case before. The number of high schools operating Title I schoolwide programs has increased. However, evaluations indicate that Title I, by itself, has not yet resulted in significant reforms in high schools.
- Relatively few high schools are undertaking serious standards-based reforms. For instance, most of the initiatives carried out through the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program have been at the elementary level.

High school reforms can be effective. For example, the Department's New American High Schools showcase sites demonstrated that standards-based, locally driven reform in high schools between 1995 and 1998 was associated with improvement in attendance and graduation rates. Schools that participate in the Southern Regional Education Board's "High Schools that Work" program — a whole-school, research-based reform initiative — have shown significant improvement in reading and mathematics scores.² The Johns Hopkins University Talent Development model has demonstrated promising results at its initial implementation site. And since states began strengthening graduation requirements, more high school students are completing challenging math courses.

Highest Level of Mathematics Course Taken at Age 17		
Highest Course Completed	1990	1996
First-year algebra	15 %	12 %
Geometry	15	16
Second-year algebra	44	50

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (1997, 1991). *Trends in Academic Progress*.

A variety of approaches to high school reform, geared to local needs and conditions, can make a difference. Since 1996, the Department's "New American High Schools" initiative has recognized high schools that fully prepare students to meet the challenges of a changing technological and global economy. In addition to meeting challenging academic standards, these public schools help students acquire the communications, problem-solving, computer, and technical skills necessary to pursue college and careers. Each of the schools also has developed effective partnerships with the community, parents, and postsecondary institutions, and has demonstrated sustained student academic performance over a

five-year period.

Other approaches include "schools within schools" and innovations that create smaller learning environments and get adults more fully involved in the lives of students, "career academies" and other approaches that structure learning around career preparation, partnerships that pair schools with business or institutions of higher education, and reforms that reorganize the school day. Most successful reforms have a strong focus on the professional development of educators and the provision of in-depth academic, career, and college counseling.

What We Propose

The Education Excellence for All Children Act of 1999 would:

- Support effective educational reforms in 5,000 American high schools by the year 2007. Our proposal would provide grants to school districts to help them improve high schools by (1) meeting the needs of students at risk of failing to master challenging academics through strengthened curricula, instruction, and extended learning opportunities; (2) improving Title I schoolwide programs; and (3) creating professional development opportunities for school staff to improve student achievement.
- Encourage the use of Title I funds so that federal, state, and local monies are collectively directed to high school reform.
- Promote research-based, schoolwide reforms, such as ensuring that students receive individual attention; challenging all students to meet high state standards; and motivating students to learn through, for example, applied learning.
- Promote safer, more supportive schools by encouraging smaller learning environments, involving members of the community, and creating partnerships with other institutions.
- Experiment with incentive awards for teachers and administrators who improve student achievement. Offering incentive awards to successful teachers and administrators could help raise student achievement. Under our proposal, the Department would select schools to participate in an experimental incentive program. Teachers and administrators at participating schools whose students showed improvement on multiple measures of student achievement would receive up to \$3,000 each, which they could use for any purpose.
- Encourage the adoption of successful high school reform strategies by recognizing high schools that show outstanding results, disseminating information on best practices, and creating networks of participating school districts to foster communication and collaboration.

Notes

⁹ American Institutes for Research. (1999). *An educators' guide to schoolwide reform*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

-###-

[Title X, Part G — 21st Century Community Learning Centers]
[Elementary School Foreign Language Assistance Program]



[Title X, Part I —

This page last modified May 19, 1999 (mhm)

NEA/AFT

Studies

[Home](#) [Publications](#) [Educational Leadership](#) [December 97/January 98](#)

Educational Leadership Vol. 55, No. 4, December 1997/January 1998

Reaching for Equity

Mary Anne Raywid

Synthesis of Research

Small Schools: A Reform That Works

Numerous studies confirm that small schools lead to improved student achievement and enable educators to realize many of the other goals of school reform.

The urgent need to improve urban schools continues to inspire reform proposals. For example, the 1995 teachers' assessment of Chicago high schools (Sebring et al.) describes "low student attendance, poor engagement in learning, and weak academic environment." The subsequent report from the student perspective (Sebring et al. 1996) describes schools "organized for failure." Such reports lead to an outpouring of suggested solutions. The more popular proposals generate a full chorus of response, including those from skeptics and cynics as well as advocates.

The skeptics and cynics are being heard now on the solution that focuses on small schools. "What do we really know about small schools?" they ask, and "What is there to recommend them?" and "Can we explain their track record?" The questions are healthy and positive in their insistence on evidence. And the answers add up, respectively, to "A great deal," "A lot," and "Yes."

What Do We Really Know About Small Schools?

Until recently, much of the evidence cited in support of small schools consisted of case studies of particular instances--the sort of evidence that skeptics could dismiss as unreliable or atypical. Other studies, however, involving thousands of students and hundreds of schools now make such dismissals impossible for any informed observer. These large-scale studies include one that examined the records of 20,000 students in Philadelphia's public high schools, comparing student performance in large and small schools (McMullan et al. 1994); another examining the scores of 13,000 youngsters in Alaska (Huang and Howley 1993); others that investigated the schools of entire states and documenting the effects of school size (Fowler 1989, Heck and Mayor 1993); and a growing number of studies based on the experiences of nearly 12,000 students in 800 high schools nationwide (Lee and Smith 1994, Lee et al. 1995).

The findings of these studies reveal an unusual consistency. The Philadelphia study concluded that high school students in small schools were more likely than those in large schools to pass major subjects and progress toward graduation. The Alaska study found that *disadvantaged* students in small schools significantly outperformed those in large schools on standardized tests of basic skills. A New Jersey study showed that size had more influence on student achievement than any other factor controllable by educators, and a study in an unidentified Western state showed that the larger the school, the lower the student scores in reading and mathematics. Finally, the national studies confirm conclusively that youngsters learn more in math, reading, history, and science in small schools than in large ones--especially disadvantaged students (Lee and Smith 1994). Moreover, findings about the impact of size appear to hold at all grade levels, with a

tendency for school size and organization to play a larger role as students get older (Howley 1989, Mosteller 1995, Lee et al. 1995).

The confidence with which the advantages of small schools can be asserted grows steadily stronger with the completion of a substantial number of compilations, or studies of studies, on the importance of size (Cotton 1996, Fowler 1995, Howley 1994, Walberg and Walberg 1994). A recent compilation examining 103 studies observed that many of them find student performance in small schools superior to that in large ones, while *none* finds the reverse to be true (Cotton 1996).

Thus it cannot be said that we lack sufficient reliable evidence of the positive effects of small school size on student success to act upon it. In fact, there is enough evidence now of such positive effects--and of the devastating effects of large size on substantial numbers of youngsters--that it seems morally questionable not to act on it. Size could eventually prove, as the title chosen by one group of analysts suggests, "the ultimate educational issue" (Berlin and Cienkus 1989).

What Is There to Recommend Them?

In addition to the effects on student achievement, there is much else to recommend small schools. First and foremost, a fairly strong record documents which students are most penalized by bigness and which gain most from reducing school size. As long ago as the 1970s researchers found that minority and lower-achieving students seemed to do better in small schools (Summers and Wolfe 1976). As common sense would suggest, the generally advantaged students--those with high ability levels and affluent, educated, and supportive families--are less penalized by large schools than are their less fortunate peers of lower ability or from poorly educated, low-income families. Some researchers find that high-ability students from well-to-do homes may actually profit more from large schools than from small schools (Howley 1995). But if so, it is definitely *not* a situation in which what's best for the strongest students is best for all. Size has negative effects in low socioeconomic settings that it does not have in high socioeconomic settings.

In small schools, otherwise "marginal" or at-risk students are much more likely to become involved, to make an effort, and to achieve (Oxley and McCabe 1990, Wehlage et al. 1987). As a result, such schools manage to reduce the well-established negative effects of race and poverty on school success. In doing so, they narrow the gap separating the school achievement levels of advantaged youngsters from those of the disadvantaged (Lee and Smith 1994, Lee and Smith 1995, Lee et al. 1995). Whereas in large high schools success tends to be stratified along socioeconomic lines, this does not hold for small schools.

Beyond this, major studies have documented that small schools are far more likely to be violence-free than large ones (Toby 1993/1994) and that students are likely to be generally better behaved (Gold and Mann 1984, Gottfredson 1985). Youngsters are also less likely to drop out of small schools (Pittman and Haughwout 1987).

A different, but no less vital, sort of indicator of effectiveness is the kind of impact a school makes on an individual's life beyond its walls--and how long such influence lasts. This, of course, is really education's ultimate goal: to affect the attitudes and dispositions and capabilities of youngsters--in short, the kind of human beings and citizens they become.

Smallness permits the sort of human connections that result in strong student-school bonds, enabling the school to affect youngsters' personal habits, such as smoking, alcohol use, and drug use; their aspirations, such as life plans; and their post-high school behavior, such as college attendance (Downey 1978, Walberg and Walberg 1994, Marian and McIntire 1992). The kind of influence a school can exert is seen in the aspirations of students attending Central Park East Secondary School in East Harlem, perhaps the nation's most famous small school: 80 percent finish high school; more than 90 percent of these then go on to college

(Bensman 1994, 1995).

Finally, small schools have produced new types and models of effective secondary education. The Metropolitan Learning Center, a high school in Portland, Oregon, for instance, is almost 30 years old. It is open to students throughout the city and imposes no special entrance requirements. It attracts students interested in the arts. Several years ago it was reporting a dropout rate of 2 percent, while that of the district stood at 30 percent. The Center also had the highest per capita scholarship rate in the city (Harris 1987).

To cite another case, Nova is a small, innovative high school in Seattle. Its 135 students enter with academic records ranging from strong to very weak, and they come from homes ranging from affluent to poor. But Nova sends 85 percent of its graduates to college, and its students' average SAT scores regularly stand at the very top among Seattle's high schools. In the spring of 1997, a new citywide writing assessment program declared 62 percent of Nova's 11th graders proficient, as compared with only 28 percent of the district's students (*Seattle Weekly* 1997).

California's Career Academies are an example of a successful new genre of schools-within-schools. They focus on introducing students to an entire industry--with the help of resources in the community--as the youngsters pursue a college prep program. The Health and Media Academies in Oakland have become nationally known for their success in marshaling business collaboration in keeping minority, largely poor youngsters in school (Guthrie and Guthrie 1993, Stern et al. 1992). Figures from two of Oakland's academies show that in this community where dropping out of high school is the norm, most academy students successfully complete high school and then go on to college.

Small schools are also producing new models for addressing what has been a difficult and growing problem for many schools: how to deal with students who do not speak English. La Escuela Fratney, a small elementary school in Milwaukee, offers a model two-way bilingual program (Peterson 1993), and New York's International High School has now inspired two or three other new small high schools in New York alone, which together represent a new model for secondary education. When they enter, International's students have been in the United States fewer than four years, and they barely speak English. More than two-thirds come from families with below-poverty incomes. Yet 96 percent of them graduate from International, and of these, an amazing 97 percent go on to college (Bush 1993).

Can We Explain This Track Record?

The success of small schools is variously attributed to a number of things: to the more human scale of such schools, to their more satisfied and willing students, to more committed teachers, to the opportunity for choice such schools typically afford, to the fact that most of them have a focus or coherent mission, to their relative autonomy and distance from the bureaucracy, to heightened responsiveness to their constituents, and to a better school-student and school-family match. But irrespective of which of these features is most important, substantial agreement is emerging as to the centrality of three ingredients in producing them: (1) small size (Walberg and Walberg 1994, Lee and Smith 1994, Lee et al. 1995), (2) an organizational structure departing significantly from the conventional (Bryk and Thum 1989, Lee et al. 1995), and (3) a setting that operates more like a community than a bureaucracy (Bryk and Driscoll 1988, Bryk et al. 1993, Bryk and Thum 1989, Lee and Smith 1994, Wehlage et al. 1987).

One reason that size appears so pivotal is that smallness *permits and invites* a number of practices and arrangements that have independently been found desirable. In other words, small schools comfortably accommodate much from the lessons we've learned about school effectiveness.

First, we've learned that school organization matters (Lee et al. 1993, Witte and Walsh

1990). Organization may be the major reason so many youngsters are more successful in the more personalized, nondepartmentalized environment of the elementary school than in the high school. The way schools are put together structurally clearly affects student achievement (Lee et al. 1995), and it affects school attendance patterns (Bryk and Thum 1989) and dropout rates (Bryk and Thum 1989, Wehlage et al. 1987). It also makes a bigger difference to disadvantaged students than to those who are not (Bryk and Thum 1989, Lee et al. 1995, Lee and Smith 1994, Bryk et al. 1993). How a school is structured obviously depends on its size: the larger it is, the greater the need for organizing people into subunits and specializations and the more fragmented the experience of teachers and students becomes.

Second, whether a school operates more as a bureaucracy or a community matters a great deal. It determines whether staff members see their job primarily as delivering services or whether they see it as succeeding in educating. It also determines whether teachers are grouped in departments and students in stratified (tracked) classes, or whether the two are grouped together in smaller units--small schools or schools-within-schools. Whether the model is bureaucracy or community has major consequences for the kinds of relationships teachers share with one another, the way they connect with students, and the way students interact with each other. Size is the key feature in permitting or denying the opportunity to make the school a community in which each individual is known and treated as such, or determining whether a depersonalized, rule-governed environment is necessary to keeping order.

Third, creating the sort of school organization that will stimulate and support success will require a lot of changes in most schools. And we've a long history to show that school change is extraordinarily difficult. Making even a small change effective is often a matter of restructuring, not just of improvement or reform. Further, restructurers have concluded that starting a new school may be far easier than refashioning an existing one. Hence, some see the establishment of small schools, or schools-within-schools, as our best response to the challenge of what to do with failing schools--or even with schools needing more modest improvement.

Fourth, there appears to be almost a natural sequence--a logical progression--taking the small schools that are adequately supported from one item on the reform agenda to the next. For instance, a small teaching staff with the collective responsibility of designing a distinctive program is stimulated to do the kind of collaborating now so strongly recommended: to pursue continuing examination together of what works and why, and what needs to be avoided. While creating their own school and program, they become a strong professional community and build the teacher ownership and commitment often missing in large schools, particularly high schools. With the stimulation and mutual assistance that are involved, they are able to plan relevant and significant work for students--"authentic" learning. At the same time, the reduced scale is also permitting teachers to establish different relationships with students. They can personalize their interactions and tailor assignments to individuals. Although such a progression is not assured, and small schools cannot guarantee it, their track record recommends them as the most hospitable and conducive setting for it that we know.

A Postscript

The longer and harder we work at school reform, the clearer two lessons become. First, there is no magic bullet--no single practice that by itself has the power to transform a failing student or school into a successful one. Be suspicious of those who tell you otherwise, irrespective of what they are proposing--be it smaller schools, school choice, direct instruction, or a demanding curriculum. Single-factor solutions aren't solutions.

The second lesson is that there is no fail-safe solution--no sequences or strategies that are guaranteed to work. The problem isn't limitations in our knowledge. It's in the nature of the

case that there is nothing--no single thing, practice, or arrangement--that works under any and all circumstances.

There appear to be at least two reasons that this is so, rendering fruitless the search for simple, guaranteed solutions. The first is that successful education is context-specific: what works under one set of circumstances fails under another. What succeeds with one child or in one community won't necessarily do so in another. The second reason is that successful schooling has so many components: it requires not just one practice or arrangement but many in order to make a school succeed. Thus, to try to improve schools by introducing a single practice may leave multiple self-defeating practices in operation--no matter how great the potential of the new idea.

That said, there is some good news. The accumulating, now substantial evidence tells us that small schools offer a setting that can accommodate and build in much of what educational research is recommending. They provide a promising reply to many of the questions that plague us, such as, How can we get effective change? and How can we make schools work for at-risk students? And they offer what is perhaps our most promising single strategy for realizing a number of the goals of current reformers--including new governance and accountability arrangements, personalization and individualization, strong professional communities, authentic instruction and engagement, and genuine and lasting achievement for a great many more youngsters. *

References

Bensman, D. (1994). *Lives of the Graduates of Central Park East Elementary School: Where Have They Gone? What Did They Really Learn?* New York: National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Bensman, D. (1995). *Learning to Think Well: Central Park East Secondary School Graduates Reflect on Their High School and College Experiences.* New York: National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Berlin, B.M., and R.C. Cienkus. (February 1989). "Size: The Ultimate Educational Issue?" *Education and Urban Society* 21: 228-231.

Bryk, A.S., and M.E. Driscoll. (1988). *The High School as Community: Contextual Influences and Consequences for Students and Teachers.* Madison, Wisc.: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools.

Bryk, A.S., and Y.M. Thum. (Fall 1989). "The Effects of High School Organization on Dropping Out: An Exploratory Investigation." *American Educational Research Journal* 26: 353-383.

Bryk, A.S., V. Lee, and P.B. Holland. (1993). *Catholic Schools and the Common Good.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Bush, T. (1993). "International High School: How Work Works." In *Public Schools That Work: Creating Community*, edited by Gregory A. Smith. New York: Routledge.

Cotton, K. (1996). *School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance.* From the School Improvement Research Series, Close-Up #20. Portland, Oreg.: NorthWestern Regional Educational Laboratory.

Downey, G. (1978). "Differences Between Entering Freshmen from Different Size High Schools." *Journal of College Student Personnel* 19: 353-358.

Fowler, W.J. Jr. (March 31, 1989). "School Size, School Characteristics, and School Outcomes." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

Fowler, W.J. Jr. (1995). "School Size and Student Outcomes." *Advances in Educational Productivity* 5: 3-26.

Gold, M., and D.W. Mann. (1984). *Expelled to a Friendlier Place: A Study of Effective Alternative Schools*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press.

Gottfredson, D. (1985). *School Size and School Disorder*. Baltimore, Md.: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University.

Guthrie, L., and G.P. Guthrie(1993). "Linking Classrooms and Communities: The Health and Media Academies in Oakland." In *Public Schools That Work: Creating Community*, edited by Gregory A. Smith. New York: Routledge.

Harris, M. (December 1987). "Metropolitan Learning Center." Memo. Portland, Oreg.

Heck, R.H., and R.A. Mayor. (1993). "School Characteristics, School Academic Indicators and Student Outcomes: Implications for Policies to Improve Schools." *Journal of Education Policy* 8: 143-154.

Howley, C.B. (Fall 1989). "Synthesis of the Effects of School and District Size: What Research Says About Achievement in Small Schools and School Districts." *Journal of Rural and Small Schools* 4: 2-12.

Howley, C.B. (November 15, 1995). "The Matthew Principle: A West Virginia Replication?" *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 3: 1-25.

Howley, C. B. (June 1994). *The Academic Effectiveness of Small-Scale Schooling (An Update)*. ERIC Digest. (ED 372 897). Charleston, W. Va.: Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.

Huang, G. and C. B. Howley. (Winter 1993). "Mitigating Disadvantage: Effects of Small-Scale Schooling on Student Achievement in Alaska." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 9: 137-149.

Lee, V.E., A.S. Bryk, and J.B. Smith. (1993). "The Organization of Effective Secondary Schools." In *Review of Research in Education*. Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association.

Lee, V., and J. Smith. (1994). *Effects of High School Restructuring and Size on Gains in Achievement and Engagement for Early Secondary School Students*. Madison, Wisc.: National Center on the Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

Lee, V., and J. Smith. (1995). *Collective Responsibility for Learning and Its Effects on Gains in Achievement for Early Secondary School Students*. Madison, Wisc.: National Center on the Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

Lee, V., J. Smith, and R. Croninger. (1995). *Understanding High School Restructuring Effects on the Equitable Distribution of Learning in Mathematics and Science*. Madison, Wisc.: National Center on the Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

Marian, S., and W. McIntire. (April 1992). "The Influence of School Size and Rurality on Achievement and Retention." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

McMullan, B.J., C.L. Sipe, and W.C. Wolf. (1994). *Charters and Student Achievement: Early Evidence from School Restructuring in Philadelphia*. Bala Cynwyd, Pa.: Center for Assessment and Policy Development.

Mosteller, F. (June 1995). "The Tennessee Study of Class Size in the Early School Grades." Unpublished manuscript.

Oxley, D., and J. McCabe. (1990). *Restructuring Neighborhood High Schools: The House Plan Solution*. New York: Public Education Association and Bank Street College of Education.

Peterson, R. (1993). "Creating a School That Honors the Traditions of a Culturally Diverse Study Body." In *Public Schools That Work: Creating Community*, edited by Gregory A. Smith. New York: Routledge.

Pittman, B., and P. Haughwout. (Winter 1987). "Influence of High School Size on Dropout Rate." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 9: 337-343.

Sebring, P.B., A.S. Bryk, and J.Q. Easton. (1995). *Charting Reform: Chicago Teachers Take Stock*. Chicago, Ill.: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Sebring, P.B., A.S. Bryk, M. Roderick, and E. Cambum. (1996). *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak*. Chicago, Ill.: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Stern, D., M. Raby, and C. Dayton. (1992). *Career Academies: Partnerships for Reconstructing American High Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Summers, A., and B.L. Wolfe. (1976). "Which School Resources Help Learning? Efficiency and Equity in Philadelphia Public Schools." *IRDC Bulletin* 11: 1-17.

Toby, J. (Winter 1993/1994). "Everyday School Violence: How Disorder Fuels It." *American Educator* 17: 4-9, 44-48.

Walberg, H.J., and H.J. Walberg III. (June/July 1994). "Losing Local Control." *Educational Researcher* 23: 19-26.

Wehlage, G.G., R.A. Rutter, and A. Tumbaugh. (March 1987). "A Program Model for At-Risk High School Students." *Educational Leadership* 45: 70-73.

Witte, J., and D. Walsh. (1990). "A Systematic Test of the Effective Schools Model." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 12: 188-212.

Author's note: This article was adapted from an occasional paper published by Chicago's Small Schools Coalition, Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, and Leadership for Quality Education.

Mary Anne Raywid is Professor Emerita at Hofstra University and a member of the Graduate Affiliate Faculty at the University of Hawaii. She may be reached at 3596 Woodlawn Dr., Honolulu, HI 96822.

Highlights of the Research on Small Schools

- Students at all grade levels learn more in small schools than in large schools, although school size and organization tend to play a greater role as students get older (Howley

1989, Mosteller 1995, Lee et al. 1995).

- At-risk students are much more likely to succeed in small schools than in large schools (Oxley and McCabe 1990, Wehlage et al. 1987).
- Small schools are far more likely to be violence-free than large schools (Toby 1993/1994).
- The bonds created in small schools enable such schools to influence students' post-high school behavior, including college attendance (Downey 1978; Walberg and Walberg 1994; Marian and McIntire 1992; Bensman 1994, 1995; *Seattle Weekly* 1997; Bush 1993).
- The success of small schools is attributable to various features, all of which seem to emerge from three key factors: (1) small size (Walberg and Walberg 1994, Lee and Smith 1994, Lee et al. 1995), (2) an unconventional organizational structure (Bryk and Thum 1989, Lee et al. 1995), and (3) a setting that operates more like a community than a bureaucracy (Bryk and Driscoll 1988, Bryk et al. 1993, Bryk and Thum 1989, Lee and Smith 1994, Wehlage et al. 1987).

ED401089 96 Ongoing Dilemmas of School Size: A Short Story. ERIC Digest.
Author: Howley, Craig

ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.

THIS DIGEST WAS CREATED BY ERIC, THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ERIC, CONTACT ACCESS ERIC 1-800-LET-ERIC

Recent national reports reinforce the growing perception that small schools are good schools. Is this new appreciation the result of changing fashion? Is it the latest fad in schooling? Does solid research suggest the superiority of small schools, and if so, how is it possible that the truth about school size could have been altered so dramatically in the space of a single generation?

It turns out that issues of size are not likely to be captured in universal guidelines. An appreciation of the history of the dilemmas of school size can help educators, citizens, and policy makers understand why.

REVOLUTION OR IRONY?

The new appreciation of small schools must seem like a revolution to educators and policy makers who have devoted careers to building large and modern schools throughout the United States and Canada. Curiously, as a national phenomenon, most of this new appreciation is based on reports from urban, rather than rural, schools (e.g., Husen, 1985; Meier, 1995; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Oxley, 1994).

From the perspective of rural citizens, however, the new appreciation must seem more ironic than revolutionary. To this day rural communities in North America struggle to retain their small schools. In these cases, state or provincial education agencies continue to close small schools and create larger ones for the sake of alleged cost-efficiency and curricular breadth (DeYoung, 1995; Howley, 1996; Mulcahy, 1996; Theobald, 1995).

TWO CONCERNS: ADMINISTRATION AND INSTRUCTION

The earliest research literature about school and district size in North America comes from a period prior to 1925. Though research methods would be judged naive and inadequate by contemporary standards, this literature shelters an important lesson. Common justifications for building larger schools and closing smaller ones were administrative and instructional. The administrative motive keeps economy of scale in view--the idea that larger units can use staff and other resources more efficiently. The instructional motive tends to pay greater attention to the effectiveness of education. The two motives lead to quite different suggestions about school size.

These two perspectives are illustrated early in the 20th century by contemporaries Ellwood Cubberley and Joseph Kennedy. Cubberley's work is better remembered because it was the stronger influence on subsequent 20th century school reform. At the time they wrote, around 1915, North America was still a mostly rural domain.

Cubberley. Cubberley was a leading professor and former urban superintendent; he and his colleagues were engaged in an important urban project--creating schools for swelling, diverse populations in an industrializing America. Cubberley (1922) championed rural school consolidation on this basis.

Cubberley's idea was that pupil-teacher ratios could be increased in consolidated schools, longer terms could be held, transportation could be provided, and rural-appropriate curriculum could be consistently offered to farm children (today, of course, farming is no longer synonymous with "rural"). Schools and districts could be led and supervised by professional education administrators, whose presence would exert the influence of informed opinion and scientific knowledge in rural communities. Cubberley's rural agenda placed a premium on large school size. In essence, the question Cubberley always asked was "How large a school can be created?"

Kennedy. Kennedy was dean of the school of education at North Dakota State University, and his 1915 book, *Rural Life and the Rural School*, is rooted in Kennedy's own rural experience. Kennedy's question about size differed sharply from Cubberley's. His underlying question was something like this: "What is the lower limit of school size?" In the rural circumstance, it made sense to ask how small schools could be and still remain pedagogically viable. He wrote,

It might happen, as it frequently does, that a school is already sufficiently large, active, and enthusiastic to make it inadvisable to give up its identity and become merged in the larger consolidated school. If there are twenty or thirty children and an efficient teacher we have the essential factors of a good school[emphasis added].

(Kennedy, 1914, p. 64)

SCHOOLS AS RECOGNIZABLE INSTITUTIONS

The two guiding questions about size are salient today. In fact, the two questions can be combined: What are the upper and lower enrollment limits of an effective or efficient school?

Restated in this way, we can see that the questions actually represent the idea that schools share certain features that lead us to recognize them as schools and not something else. An institution intended to be a school, but which is too large, or too small, ceases thereby to be a school. The smallest "schools" may look like (or be) families and the largest "schools" may look like (or be) factories or prisons.

Unlike Cubberley and his contemporary readers, North Americans today understand that schools can be too large to perform effectively or even efficiently (e.g., NASSP, 1996). Interest in home-schooling, however, demonstrates that many North Americans are willing to allow that families can provide school-like experiences.

CONTEMPORARY DILEMMAS

The lurking issue of upper and lower limits has usually tended to resolve itself in the search for optimal school size: What is the one-best size (or size range) for public elementary, junior high, and senior high schools? Usually, this one-best size or size range was not thought of as relative to circumstances, but was regarded as a sort of natural law.

The relativism of optimal size. In recent decades, however, some researchers have dismissed the search for optimal size as naive or misdirected. In their view, the most suitable size for a school is likely to vary from place to place (see in particular the extensive work of David Monk and Emil Haller).

An emerging line of evidence suggests that a community's relative poverty or affluence is a likely indicator of size-relevant variability (Friedkin & Necochea, 1988; Howley, 1996; Plecki, 1991). In this line of research, school sizes associated with high levels of student achievement appear to be tied to the socioeconomic status of a community. Small schools are found to provide an achievement advantage for impoverished students, but not for affluent students, who may fare better in larger schools.

These findings are a challenge for school administration and educational policy, since additional evidence suggests that expenditures (per pupil or overall) exhibit a U-shaped association with size, with the largest and smallest schools showing diseconomies of scale (Fox, 1980). Not only are small schools more expensive to maintain on a per-pupil basis, but impoverished communities confront problems unimaginable to many affluent communities, and they do so with fewer resources. Taken together, the findings suggest that administrators and policy makers need to find ways to sustain and improve small

schools in impoverished communities if they really expect all children to learn at high levels.

Rural challenges. Distance and topography often compound the challenges of large size in rural areas. Many rural schools have been closed; students typically endure long bus rides; and parents must travel long distances if they are to participate in school events. Widespread rural poverty also means that increases in school size--as in urban areas--may be educationally counterproductive in precisely the places most likely to be consolidation targets (e.g., Howley, 1996). *Sustainable Small Schools: A Handbook for Rural Communities*, edited by Craig B. Howley and Jon Eckman (1997), published by this Clearinghouse, can help rural community members grapple with these challenges.

Urban challenges. In urban communities, however, huge schools were created earlier in the century. In many communities changes in residential patterns have turned large, middle-class schools into large schools attended by impoverished students. Too many of these schools have become dysfunctional, serving society, individuals, and the local community badly. In cities, large schools can achieve a scale rarely found in rural areas, simply as a result of population density. Meier's (1995) *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* considers the reasons for and ways of creating and nurturing small schools in cities.

The danger of simulations. Is there anything magical about size that it should embody these dilemmas and pose these challenges? The answer is a guarded "yes." Size is the chief structural feature of an organization. That means we should expect it to influence lives (cf. Meier, 1995). If size is a structural phenomenon, however, caution is warranted in approaching the simulation of small size through such mechanisms as "schools-within-schools" and "house plans" (Meier, 1995; Oxley, 1994; Raywid, 1996). In general, despite substantial popularity, research on the effectiveness of simulating small size as a way to restructure is very limited (Raywid, 1996).

Deborah Meier (1995) suggests that such simulations are not likely to realize the benefits of small organizational scale. Separate buildings are not a requirement, says Meier; but separate leadership and independent authority are. Quite likely, an essential characteristic of the institution we call "school" is an independence similar to the sovereignty of nations (cf. Raywid, 1996).

NO SIMPLE ANSWERS

Practitioners, citizens, and policy makers need to appreciate the complexity involved with considerations of size. More and more it seems that small schools hold particular promise for helping impoverished students maximize their potential to achieve academically. This hardly means that small schools are the best choice for all students under all circumstances.

REFERENCES

- Cubberley, E. (1922). *Rural life and education: A study of the rural-school problem as a phase of the rural-life problem* (Rev. ed.). New York: Houghton-Mifflin. (ED 392 559, original work published 1915)
- DeYoung, A. (1995). *The life and death of a rural American high school: Farewell, Little Kanawha*. New York: Garland.
- Fox, W. (1980). *Relationships between size of schools and school districts and the cost of education*. Washington, DC: Economics, Statistics, and Cooperatives Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. (ED 187 029)
- Friedkin, N., & Necochea, J. (1988). School system size and performance: A contingency perspective. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 10(3), 237-249.
- Howley, C. (1996). Compounding disadvantage: Consolidation and the effects of school and district size on student achievement in West Virginia. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 12(1), 25-32.

Husen, T. (1985). The school in the achievement-oriented society: Crisis and reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 66(6), 398-402.

Kennedy, J. (1914). *Rural life and the rural school*. New York: American Book Company. (ED 392 561)

Meier, D. (1995). *The power of their ideas: Lessons for America from a small school in Harlem*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Mulcahy, D. (1996, October). Reforming small schools out of existence: A Canadian example. Presentation at the annual meeting of the National Rural Education Association, San Antonio, TX. (Dennis Mulcahy, Memorial University, St. Johns, Newfoundland, can be contacted at dmulcahy@morgan.ucs.mun.ca)

National Association of Secondary School Principals. (1996). *Breaking ranks: Changing an American institution*. Reston, VA: Author. (ED 393 205)

Newmann, F., & Wehlage, G. (1995). *Successful school restructuring: A report to the public and educators by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools. (ED 387 925)

Oxley, D. (1994). Organizing schools into small units: Alternatives to Homogeneous grouping. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 75(7), 521-526.

Plecki, M. (1991, April). The relationship between elementary school size and student achievement. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL. (ERIC/CRESS Accession No. RC 019 440)

Raywid, M. (1996). *Taking stock: The movement to create mini-schools, schools-within-schools, and other small schools*. New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.

Theobald, P. (1995). *Call school: Rural education in the Midwest to 1918*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Note: This digest is part of a series on current issues related to small schools. For broader syntheses of the literature see Fowler (1992, ED 347 675), Stockard and Mayberry (1992, ED 350 674), and Cotton (1996, RC 020 728, ED number forthcoming), as well as other ERIC digests on small schools, school size, and learning environments in general. As of June 1996, the ERIC database (1966-1996) comprises 480 resources with "school size" as a major topic, including 130 research reports, of which approximately 65 have been published in the journal literature.

Craig B. Howley is the director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002012. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, the Department, or AEL.

General News Articles

EDUCATION WEEK on the WEB

[IN CONTEXT](#) | [THE ARCHIVES](#) | [TEACHER MAGAZINE](#) | [THE DAILY NEWS](#) | [SPECIAL REPORTS](#) | [PRODUCTS & SERVICES](#)

EDUCATION WEEK

Quality Counts '98

Contents

The Challenges

The Solutions

State by State

Order



Click Here

If you have your images turned off, you may be missing several important links.

Think Small

Size isn't everything, especially in big-city schools.

With its pastel walls and polished hardwood floors, it's hard to believe that a few years ago, the Wings Academy in the South Bronx was a functioning metalworking factory. But then again, it doesn't much resemble a typical New York City high school either. And that's just fine with Nateca Pedro.

The 17-year-old senior, who entered the academy as a 9th grader when it opened in 1994, says the nontraditional high school offers a sanctuary from the large and violence-prone middle school she attended before. Wings, with 325 students, is one of an expanding flock of small schools that are taking flight across the city. "You can concentrate better," Ms. Pedro says of the school. "You get more attention and a better education."

Members of the urban small schools movement fully agree. Their idea--simple in theory but far-reaching in its implications--boils down to this: When it comes to schooling, big cities should think small. Over the past decade, scores of small schools or schools-within-schools have sprung up, many of them in New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

The new schools take different forms, and the degree of autonomy they enjoy varies greatly. Most share space with existing schools or other small schools, although some, like Wings Academy, have their own buildings. Some start from scratch, while others result from the breakup of large, traditional high schools. In another variation on the theme, a growing number of big urban schools are carving out houses or academies that aim--with mixed success--to replicate small-school conditions within the larger institutional structure.

Amid this activity, there is no uniform definition of what constitutes small. While some say an urban high school with as many 1,000 students qualifies, many advocates of downsizing think any school over 500 students is too big.

As matters stand, 85 percent of high school students in the 74 urban districts examined for *Quality Counts* attend schools with more than 900 students.

Even ardent proponents of scaled-down schooling agree that simply being small is not enough. Many call it a prerequisite for creating a climate in which teachers and students know each other well, bureaucracy is kept at bay, and innovative and personalized forms of teaching and learning flourish.

The Solutions

Raise the Bar	➤
Make Performance Count	➤
Let Leaders Lead	➤
Recruit for Success	➤
Support Your Local Teacher	➤
Build Strength at the Top	➤
Go the Extra Mile	➤
Reach Out	➤
Think Small	➤
Fix the Roof	➤
Encourage Competition	➤
Don't Reward Failure	➤
A Model Urban Elementary School	➤
High Schools: No Quick Fixes	➤

"Small is a necessary but not sufficient condition," says Jacqueline Ancess, the associate director of the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching, based at Teachers College, Columbia University.

In New York, a coalition of four nonprofit groups is nourishing a growing crop of small schools with the help of a five-year, \$25 million Annenberg Foundation challenge grant. In the past three years, the number of affiliated schools has swelled from 82 to 140. ✓

Chicago is experiencing its own small-schools boom, inspired in part by New York City's efforts. University scholars, reform groups, and private foundations have helped educators create dozens of new schools, mostly within larger schools. They include 24 supported by \$10,000 planning grants distributed in 1995 by the city's reform school board.

And in Philadelphia, all of the district's 22 comprehensive high schools have been broken up into "small learning communities" in a reform effort supported with \$16 million from the locally based Pew Charitable Trusts.

In all three cities, relations between small-school advocates and the central office have waxed and waned. Issues of autonomy, support, and integration into the districts' accountability schemes loom large.

Meanwhile, the state role in creating and supporting small schools has generally been limited. "This has been a more local, district thing," says Mary Anne Raywid, a professor emerita at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., who has written extensively on small schools. "And it's heaviest where schools are worst, which is urban areas."

In New York, however, the state has helped out by cutting small schools some slack from state regulations governing student assessment. That latitude came in the form of five-year waivers, initially granted in 1995 to 28 schools and later extended to several others. The waivers allow them to substitute alternative assessment measures for the state's required graduation tests in science and social studies. Now, in light of sweeping changes to the state's graduation requirements, state officials are working with representatives of small schools to craft a new system of recognizing alternative assessment methods.

Research on smaller school settings has consistently found that they produce better attendance, lower dropout rates, fewer incidents of violence, and greater participation in extracurricular activities, according to Kathleen Cotton, an Oregon researcher who analyzed the findings of 103 earlier studies and reviews. Her 1996 analysis also found that students in small schools have more-positive attitudes toward academics and that poor and minority students gained the most from small settings.

As for academic achievement, the evidence in favor of small schools is less clear from the research. But a recent study that recommended 600 to 900 students as the ideal size for a high school may influence the debate.

That study, based on math and reading data from a federally supported

testing program that is tracking 24,000 students over time, found that students learned less in schools above or below that ideal range. Noting that performance of poor and minority students was most affected by school size, the researchers concluded that urban districts should break up big schools while making sure the smaller units are large enough to offer a sufficiently broad curriculum.

"Now it's almost like a mantra: 'Small is good, big is bad,'" observes Valerie E. Lee, a professor of education at the University of Michigan, who co-wrote the study with Julia B. Smith of Western Michigan University. "But there's a balance between the smallness that brings intimate social relations and having a school that's large enough to have a rational academic program."

[< PREVIOUS PAGE](#)

[NEXT PAGE >](#)

PHOTO: Teacher Sharilyn Kyle works with 9th graders Luis Arroyo, left, and Linden Buchanan in an algebra class at the Wings Academy, one of New York City's growing number of small schools.

-- Benjamin Tice Smith

SUBSCRIBE	ABOUT THIS SITE	FEEDBACK	SEARCH THE SITE	JOBS	HOME
---------------------------	---------------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------------	----------------------	----------------------

© 1998 Editorial Projects in Education

FEBRUARY 24, 1999

EDUCATION WEEK on the WEB



IN CONTEXT THE ARCHIVES TEACHER MAGAZINE THE DAILY NEWS SPECIAL REPORTS PRODUCTS & SERVICES

When It Comes to *School Size*, Smaller Is Better

By Andrew Rotherham

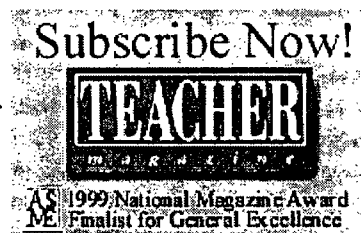
COMPAQ

In his State of the Union Address last month, President Clinton again called on Congress to pass school construction legislation. As a result of rising enrollment, aging buildings, federal mandates, and deferred maintenance, the nation's schools face an infrastructure crisis. Mr. Clinton is proposing interest-free school bonds subsidized by federal tax credits to address the problem. And, after several years of bitter opposition, Republicans in Congress have unveiled a competing proposal. Clearly this is an important issue, but before politicians from both parties rush to outspend each other they should discuss the long-ignored issue of *school size*.

As a result of rising enrollment, aging buildings, federal mandates, and deferred maintenance, the nation's schools face an infrastructure crisis.

In many areas of American life, a defining mantra of this century has been "bigger is better." Education is no exception and actually has typified this trend. During this century, the size of schools has grown tremendously, particularly in urban areas. Nationwide since World War II, the number of schools declined 70 percent while average size grew fivefold. More than one in four secondary schools nationwide enrolls more than 1,000 students, and enrollments of 2,000 and 3,000 are not uncommon. In New York City, there are nine schools with more than 4,000 students; John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx enrolls 5,300.

The thinking behind large schools was that bigger meant more extracurricular opportunities, a more diverse curriculum, and more resources for students as a result of economies of scale. Intuitively, this makes sense; however, a growing body of research and public opinion indicates that it is misguided and that, when it comes to *school size*, smaller is actually better.



Most important, research now shows that oversized schools are actually a detriment to student achievement, especially for poor children. Even assuming that larger schools did equate to more fiscal efficiency, diverse curriculum, and extracurricular activities, those factors have not translated into better student achievement. In fact, the research is pretty clear on this point: Smaller schools help promote learning. And, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, research shows that small schools are able to offer a strong core curriculum and, except in extremely small schools, a comparable level of academically advanced courses.

Additional research has shown that students from smaller schools have better attendance, and that when students move from large schools to

smaller ones their attendance improves. Smaller schools also have lower dropout rates and fewer discipline problems. A 1992 study by Jean Stockard and Maralee Mayberry stated that "behavior problems are so much greater in larger schools that any possible virtue of larger size is canceled out by the difficulties of maintaining an orderly learning environment."

According to researcher Kathleen Cotton, larger *school size* hasn't translated into more extracurricular participation. In a 1996 study, Ms. Cotton found that in smaller schools students are more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and to hold positions of responsibility in those activities. Moreover, she found that as *school size* increases, opportunities for participation increase as well--but not proportionately.

Nor are larger schools more efficient. A 1996 study by Valerie Lee and Julie Smith reported that large schools are actually more expensive because their sheer size requires more administrative support. More important, additional bureaucracy translates into less flexibility and innovation.

Taxpayers have a right to expect that their tax dollars are being invested in effective, research-based ways that maximize the benefit for children.

Research shows that economically advantaged students can achieve in large schools. Paradoxically, it is underprivileged students who are likely to be concentrated in oversized schools.

Education researchers are not the only ones picking up on these problems--parents get it, too. When asked in a 1997 study by the Hudson Institute why they had chosen charter schools instead of traditional public schools, 53 percent of parents cited small *school size*. It was the most frequent response, ahead of higher standards, educational philosophy, greater

parental involvement, and better teachers. It is also telling that urban parents, whose children are most likely to be in excessively large schools, are also the parents most likely to express dissatisfaction with their public schools.

There isn't agreement about what *school size* is ideal, although the consensus of researchers is that no school should serve more than 1,000 students and that elementary schools should not exceed 300 to 400 students. There is also a general acknowledgment that the huge 2,000-, 3,000-, and 4,000-student schools now in use are much too large.

As a policy matter, the federal government can't and shouldn't get involved in specific decisions about individual school design. On the other hand, taxpayers have a right to expect that their tax dollars are being invested in effective, research-based ways that maximize the benefit for children. Congress should include broad guidelines in any school facilities legislation to encourage construction and renovation designs that benefit kids. Districts building smaller schools or converting existing oversized schools into smaller ones should be given priority for this funding. And the federal government should collect more data and sponsor more research on this issue.

Some congressional Republicans will continue to balk at any federal involvement in school construction, and others will object to attaching any federal guidelines to funding. Liberal Democrats will cringe at even common-sense standards being attached to federal money flowing to a favored constituency. They are both wrong. Federal resources are needed to address the facilities crisis that public schools are facing, but should be invested in the most effective way possible.

All aspects of our education system should be designed to facilitate high academic performance; school buildings are no exception. Smaller, more autonomous, flexible, and accountable schools should characterize education in the next century.

Building and renovating schools in a vacuum will not strengthen America's public school system. But adequate resources are as important to effective schooling as high standards for students and teachers and strong accountability. Too often in Washington, debates are framed purely in quantitative terms. We certainly need to build more schools, but in many cases, not simply more of the same.

Andrew Rotherham is the director of the 21st Century Schools Project at the Progressive Policy Institute in Washington.

SUBSCRIBE	ABOUT THIS SITE	FEEDBACK	SEARCH THE SITE	JOBS	HOME
---------------------------	---------------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------------	----------------------	----------------------

© 1999 Editorial Projects in Education Vol. 18, number 24, page 76, 52

11TH STORY of Level 1 printed in FULL format.

Copyright 1999 Multimedia Publishing of North Carolina, Inc.
Asheville Citizen-Times (Asheville, NC)

May 18, 1999, Tuesday

ON: Editorial; Pg. A5

LENGTH: 637 words

HEADLINE: SMALL SCHOOLS OFFER A MORE NURTURING ENVIRONMENT

BYLINE: By Anna Hicks

BODY:

In the aftermath of the Columbine High School tragedy, amidst the calls for "constant vigilance," it is important to consider the implication of size in relation to the management of safe schools, particularly the American high school.

Every principal's worst nightmare is the armed intruder in the building. The nightmare is even more frightening when the armed individuals are students. Imagine such a scenario in a large high school of more than 1,000 students, a facility with many entrances and exits - a place where even the presence of a school resource officer or the most well rehearsed crisis management plan is useless.

School size matters. It matters for many reasons. Though violence can and does occur in small schools, much of the research on what makes good safe schools now indicates that a quality school is about relationships - healthy relationships among the adults in the school, among the students, among the adults and the students, and with the community. Such relationships are more likely to occur in smaller schools. TedSizer, (1992) founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools and author of *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School* notes, "It is that the school itself has to be of human scale - a place where everyone can know everyone else (p.91).

Large high schools foster an impersonal climate that often results in the alienation of students. Students who cannot find a legitimate place to fit in may engage in painful, unhealthy attempts as they watch others find their niche in sports, the arts and service activities.

Western North Carolina is blessed with many small schools, and while small high schools may not enjoy the advantages of broad course offerings or a large student pool from which to build winning athletic teams in the largest class of competition, they enjoy other advantages. They give to students what Deborah Meier (1995) describes in *The Power of Their Ideas*; a democratic climate, a chance to really know one's teachers and be known, easier access for parents and the public, and immersion into a culture that the faculty has worked to shape.

Class size is often smaller as well as pupil-teacher ratios, both conducive to a more informal social climate, communication systems and fewer discipline problems. There are more opportunities for extracurricular participation. The 1996 work of Coladarci and Cobb shows a positive effect on the self-esteem of students engaged in such participation. Connections with a significant adult are also more likely in smaller schools. The parents and teachers of my generation

worked very hard to help us fit into our culture. Sadly, we now find ourselves seeking to protect our children from such a culture.

Will we witness the demise of the large high school? That is unlikely. Large schools are more economically efficient. However, the needs of our children demand that we give thoughtful, reflective attention to the design of new schools and the reorganization of large existing facilities. Some large high schools now divide themselves into schools within schools, where even within large buildings students find a home in a smaller setting.

Yes, relationships in schools matter and quality relationships are more likely to occur in schools of manageable and meaningful size where adult conversation and decisions reflect what is truly in the best interest of our children.

.....

Anna T. Hicks, Ph.D., a former high school principal is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations at Western Carolina University where she coordinates the Master's of School Administration Program. Her research interests include the principalship, women in educational leadership, and student voice in school.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO OF ANNA HICKS RAN WITH COLUMN.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

LOAD-DATE: May 20, 1999

Copyright 1999 Charleston Newspapers
The Sunday Gazette Mail

May 09, 1999, Sunday

ON: News; Pg. P1C

LENGTH: 1311 words

HEADLINE: Are bigger schools better ? Parents are questioning whether they really are the financial, academic answer

BYLINE: Eric Eyre

BODY:

SUNDAY GAZETTE-MAIL

At a meeting at Capital High School last week, Kanawha County Schools Area Assistant Superintendent Patricia Petty unveiled several proposals for new "elementary centers" on Charleston's West Side.

"As you can see, we don't have any mega-schools here," Petty said.

A school counselor pointed out that one proposal called for a school housing 976 children.

"That is a big school," Petty conceded.

A week earlier, Ron Duerring was interviewing for the Kanawha County schools superintendent job. He praised a plan to close four or five elementary schools in the DuPont area and open a new elementary center with 700 students.

And at another recent meeting, school board member Cheryle Hall remarked, "2,000 [students] is a nice-size high school."

Kanawha County school leaders tell parents and teachers that bigger is better when it comes to school size.

But the overwhelming majority of research on school size tells a different story.

In January, University of Hawaii at Manoa Professor Mary Ann Raywid examined dozens of studies on school size and determined that students

The Sunday Gazette Mail, May 09, 1999

- especially those from low-income families - perform better academically in small schools. Parents become more involved in small schools than they do in large ones. Dropout rates are lower. Kids participate in more extracurricular activities.

"We know the research shows that children need to be in smaller classes and smaller schools," said Linda Martin, who heads a group called Challenge West Virginia, which supports small schools. "We need to make children our priority."

Large-school supporters say bigger schools: Save taxpayers money; don't have split-grade classrooms where students in two grades share a teacher; provide more services and courses; and offer more advanced classes.

Support for small schools seems to be growing in West Virginia. Parents are starting to question whether larger schools save money. Maintenance costs decline, but transportation costs increase. The number of principals drops, but the number of assistant principals increases. More counselors need to be hired to keep track of students in large schools. The number of teachers stays about the same.

"I have never seen any data that has convinced me you save money," said Jim Lees, a Charleston attorney and gubernatorial candidate who believes some students become alienated in large schools.

"You have huge social problems when you turn schools into college campuses. You will never convince me if you go to a high school of 2,000 kids, these students are going to get the same degree of attention vs. a school with 200 students per grade."

What's the ideal size for a school?

Raywid's analysis showed that no studies recommend elementary schools

The Sunday Gazette Mail, May 09, 1999

larger than 350 students or high schools bigger than 900 students.

The recent Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform report set the

limits at 350 students for elementary schools and 500 for high schools. The National Association of Secondary School Principals

recommends a limit of 600 students for middle and high schools.

Researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that elementary school students do better in schools with enrollments of 350 or less.

"Ideally, every student would attend a small school," the report concludes.

The state School Building Authority, which funds many school building projects, sets minimum limits of 300 students for elementary schools, 450 for middle schools and 800 students for high schools. At those levels, schools can provide a "thorough and efficient" education, according to the authority's literature.

School Building Authority officials, who frequently come under attack for supporting consolidation and large schools, pass out a study which recommends high schools of 600 to 900 students.

"We get criticized for our big schools," said David Sneed, chief architect at the authority. "But our 'big' schools are much smaller than those in other states."

Yet Kanawha County administrators and some school board members continue to push for large schools.

The new Riverside High School, which opens in late August, will house about 1,400 students, many from disadvantaged backgrounds.

There's also talk of building a high school of a similar size along Corridor G, south of Charleston. That school would accept students

from Lincoln County and the George Washington High School attendance area.

About 750 students attend George Washington, generally considered one of the top two or three high schools for academics in West Virginia. It will also be Kanawha County's smallest high school once Riverside opens.

Among Kanawha County elementary schools, Point Harmony has the largest enrollment with 634 students, followed by Elk with 608, and Flinn with 534.

Most of the proposed consolidations in the county would result in schools with more than 350 students.

"When you get into the large elementary schools you lose the personal touch," said Karen Winter, a counselor at Grandview Elementary School, where enrollment would jump from 290 to 605 students under one consolidation proposal. "We need to figure the best way to have consolidation without having huge schools."

Another proposal would close Chelyan Elementary School, shipping those children to two or three schools in Kanawha County's eastern end. Many parents don't like the plan. They like their community school.

"It's like a family here. There's a bonding," said Koreen Villers, a Chelyan parent who vows to fight to save her neighborhood school. "At big schools, the teachers can't get to know all the kids. We're going to have children lost in the cracks."

School system Maintenance Director Ben Shew said he supports consolidation and bigger schools. But after attending a conference last week on school violence, he's rethinking his position.

"One of the problems I keep hearing is the lack of community in the

The Sunday Gazette Mail, May 09, 1999

schools," Shew said. "Maybe we ought to look at what would be best for the community instead of just looking at expenses."

Consolidation supporters argue the larger elementary centers can bring children and communities together. On Charleston's West Side, students frequently transfer in and out of five neighborhood schools. With one or two elementary centers, children could stay together, said Fran Thalheimer, a counselor at Chandler Elementary School.

"These centers will bring that type of community back," Thalheimer said. "We need to do something to help these kids develop new friendships."

Large elementary schools also usually have full-time librarians, counselors, and music, art and gym teachers.

"All in all, they provide a better program for kids," said Kanawha County Superintendent Ron Duerring.

In Vermont, the Legislature paid for a study that showed small schools - many with under 100 students - cost about 18 percent more to operate than the state average.

The study found that students in small schools do as well or better than those in larger schools. Meanwhile, teacher salaries were lower in the small schools, and students came from a higher percentage of low-income families than the state average.

The Vermont Department of Education concluded that small schools were worth the investment because they bring communities together and increase achievement of disadvantaged students.

"Vermont has decided children are worth the expense," said Martin of Challenge West Virginia. "For us in West Virginia to say we cannot educate children in proper ways is an outrage."

To contact staff writer Eric Eyre, call 348-5194.

LOAD-DATE: May 10, 1999

15TH STORY of Level 1 printed in FULL format.

Copyright 1999 The Washington Post
The Washington Post

May 13, 1999, Thursday, Final Edition

SECTION: WEEKLY - MD; Pg. M01; HOMEROOM

LENGTH: 1282 words

HEADLINE: Assembly Lines for Alienated Teens

BYLINE: Karin Chenoweth

BODY:

Dear Homeroom:

In light of the events in Littleton, Colo., do you think it is time we took another look at our attitude toward mega-high schools, with enrollments tipping past 2,000 students? It may be simplistic to think that a smaller high school would have averted such a tragedy, but perhaps we should think how the mega-high school may ignore the needs--or even the very existence--of the marginal students. Could we do better by all of our students with smaller high schools?

Sandra Arnoult

Silver Spring

I have always maintained that if we want an institution that encourages our adolescents to be alienated and occasionally violent, then we have created the perfect institution in the modern American high school.

Large and impersonal, big high schools--and many middle schools, too, for that matter--more closely resemble factories than places of learning. Many of them appear to have given up trying to establish adult values and norms at all, and instead operate in a punitive way, with more and more disciplinarians, security guards and other accouterments of large institutions. With so many teenagers and so few adults who care about them in these schools, kid culture becomes dominant. And that, no matter what children may tell their parents, is deeply frightening to teenagers.

Would a small school have prevented the Littleton tragedy? I would never make that claim. The boys involved were clearly very sick kids, and nothing might have averted such a disaster except, perhaps, a coherent mental health system. But if being marginalized by other teens and ignored by the adults in the building was in fact the trigger for the murderous rage of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, as it appears from newspaper accounts, it makes sense that it might not have happened in a small school where the adults were able to pay attention to each of the students.

Many analyses of Littleton have centered on why teachers didn't pick up and report on the clearly aberrant thought patterns of Harris and Klebold. Well, typical high school teachers who see 150 or more students a day will--if they are very conscientious, hard-working and caring--try to establish serious

The Washington Post, May 13, 1999

links with some of their students. But they are precluded by the very nature of their job from doing that with many of them.

Even if they see a troubled kid and report him, or her, often no action is by administrators who have thousands of students to deal with and who are overwhelmed by the managerial task of running such a large institution. In short, it is very easy for adults in a big school to completely lose sight of individual students and their learning.

This is a system that should be seriously rethought.

We should start by thinking through the purpose of high school and then build institutions to suit the purpose. The purpose of high school is to provide a place for children to become educated citizens of a democracy. It should be a place to learn a great deal about the things that we as grown-ups think are vital to know about, namely math, science, history, literature, foreign languages and the arts. And it should be a place where students can learn a little bit about a wide variety of things that are less vital but still good to know about, such as sports and whatever intellectual passions are found among the adults in the building.

Further, high school should be a place where students learn to deal with a wide variety of other people, where they learn about rich and middle-class people if they are poor, and poor and middle-class people if they are rich.

It should be a place where children of all races and ethnicities learn to get along because they need to know how to function in a wider society than that provided by just family and neighborhood.

This can all be done best in a high school with no more than about 800 students--big enough to give some variety and challenge, but small enough so that all students, teachers and administrators know each other by sight if not by personality. I would prefer even smaller schools, but a school with between 700 and 800 students is big enough to sustain a drama club, sports teams, a newspaper, a yearbook club, a band, an orchestra and a debate team and still small enough that every student can find a healthy niche.

is big enough that teachers have the opportunity to have colleagues who teach the same subject, but small enough that all teachers know each other and know their students, forming a community of learning.

We have built mega-high schools out of a false notion that there are "economies of scale" that can be realized with schools of 1,500, 2,000 or even 3,000 students. But the economies are illusory.

With big schools we need more administrators to communicate among departments and grade levels and other administrators. We need more security guards and metal detectors. We need more buses and bus drivers because more students travel farther from their neighborhoods. We need more counseling programs and specialized help for students that we would not need in smaller, more focused schools. In other words, to manage such unwieldy institutions, we need all kinds of things that are expensive but do not directly contribute to learning. Paying for all that stuff means we skimp on teachers, so as a result we have such large classes that teachers and students never get to know each other.

The Washington Post, May 13, 1999

Interestingly, when asked why they left high school, dropouts often say that they felt lost and that no one knew them. That is, they leave not because they are failing (they often say they felt insulted by the low standards they were expected to meet, in fact) but because they do not feel a part of a learning community and feel no connection with the adults in the building.

Some urban schools, which faced serious problems with school violence earlier than suburban schools, have recognized the importance of school size. New York City, for example, has had tremendous success by establishing very small schools, sometimes by partitioning large school buildings.

Keep in mind that at 1,900 students, Columbine High School in Littleton is not huge by Montgomery County or national standards. But it was big enough that the principal didn't know he had students marching up and down his halls in black trench coats, intimidating and being intimidated by others.

It is time for us to think about exactly what kind of environment we have created for our children.

Mental Health Screening

Dear Homeroom:

Regarding the lack of screening for mental health problems in the schools, which has been brought out in the wake of the shootings in Littleton, I wanted to let you know that there are mental health resources for parents and educators, including a parent checklist on depression on the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill Web site. Also, for a free brochure on teenage depression and depressive disorders in children, call the NAMI Helpline at 1-800-950-6264.

Brenda Souto

Editor, Because Kids Grow Up

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill

Our knowledge of brain disorders is still at such a primitive level that many teens and children are hanging on with all their might until we have some definite answers. But neuroscience is beginning to come up with ways to grapple with such problems as depression, mood disorders and schizophrenia, and NAMI is one way to keep up with the latest research.

Homeroom is a forum for you. Send questions, opinion and issues you would like to see discussed to Homeroom, The Washington Post, 51 Monroe St. Suite 500, Rockville, Md. 20850. The fax number is 301-279-5665. Or you can e-mail homeroom@washpost.com.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

LOAD-DATE: May 13, 1999

35TH STORY of Level 1 printed in FULL format.

Copyright 1999 The Courier-Journal
The Courier-Journal (Louisville, KY.)

April 4, 1999, Sunday MET/METRO
Correction Appended

SECTION: NEWS Pg.01b

LENGTH: 1076 words

HEADLINE: Being small can be good for schools, educators say
Frankfort High shows quality isn't a function of size

BYLINE: MICHAEL JENNINGS, The Courier-Journal

SOURCE: STAFF

BODY:

Even with football players and cheerleaders doing double duty as instrumentalists, Frankfort High School's marching band has trouble filling out a formation when it takes to the field.

With just 310 students, the school must sometimes cut and splice to do things that come more easily to larger schools.

But don't look to Frankfort High to support an argument that small enrollments limit learning. In fact, smallness can be an advantage, according to the evidence from Frankfort High, as well as national research.

The issue is important in Louisville because of Western High School's situation.

Jefferson County Superintendent Stephen Daeschner and his staff built a case for shutting Western in part on its steady loss of students. From 1992 to this year, the numbers have fallen from 1,038 to 680, about 34 percent.

Two weeks ago, the school board voted 4-3 against closing the school, but most of the members endorsed the notion that low enrollment is an educational problem. Daeschner contends that when a high school's enrollment slips below 800, deficiencies creep in.

Test scores make it clear that Western and some other smaller high schools in Jefferson County do have educational problems. With students free to go elsewhere under the district's school-choice system, falling enrollments and low achievement seem to fuel each other in a vicious cycle.

But as Frankfort High's example suggests, small size - at least in schools with stable enrollment - may also contribute to quality:

7 In the latest two-year cycle of accountability testing, Frankfort, the only high school in the city's district, outscored all but three of Jefferson County's 20 high schools.

The Courier-Journal (Louisville, KY.), April 4, 1999

7 Frankfort High's seniors score above average on the American College Test, a widely used admissions exam.

7 Recent graduates have gotten into high-ranking universities, such as Brown, Princeton and Vanderbilt.

"I'm biased toward small high schools - small schools in general," said Mike Oder, the Frankfort superintendent. "I think that we are able to develop more of a family and personal atmosphere just by the sheer numbers."

Some administrators contend that small schools have trouble offering the rich variety of courses and activities available at big, "comprehensive" high schools. But Frankfort High finds a way: It offers three languages and Advanced Placement classes; has a tradition of sending its entire student body to presidential inaugurations; and has a full array of major and minor sports, including boys' and girls' soccer, swimming, tennis and golf.

"We tend to get a tremendous amount of our students involved in activities outside of the classroom," Oder said. That doesn't come cheap: Per-pupil spending at Frankfort High is nearly \$ 6,000 a year, compared with \$ 4,613 at Shawnee, the Jefferson County high school with the highest per-pupil spending.

Oder considers the extra money well spent.

Even Daeschner's district has long recognized the value of small schools, at least for some purposes.

The Brown School, which spans kindergarten through 12th grade, holds enrollment to about 600 and markets its communitylike atmosphere.

"The best thing here is a greater sense of belonging," said Ron Freeman, the Brown principal. He said that shows up in the high attendance and low truancy and suspensions.

Brent McKim, a physics teacher at Jefferson County's duPont Manual High, said he saw the downside of large schools when he taught at Ben Davis High School and Arsenal Technical High School, both in Indianapolis. Davis had about 2,500 students and Arsenal about 3,000, he said.

"There were real problems with those schools being impersonal," said McKim, who is vice president of the Jefferson County Teachers Association. Teachers who observed hallway disturbances were unlikely to know the students involved, for example, "so there was often no consequence if they were doing something they shouldn't be doing," he said.

Educators say there is a strong, research-based national trend toward smaller high schools and breaking big schools into more intimate units. Fairdale High joined this trend in 1994 by subdividing into three "houses," each with fewer than 400 students, an assistant principal and counselor and about 20 teachers.

The Coalition of Essential Schools, a national network of more than 1,000 schools and 24 regional centers that is based in Oakland, Calif., has been a force behind the movement toward smaller high schools. ✓

The Courier-Journal (Louisville, KY.), April 4, 1999

"A small school is not inherently . . . a better school," but research shows "that small schools in general tend to be better for students," said Adam Tucker, the center's director of public engagement and advocacy.

Tucker said students in small schools are likelier to pass major subjects, well on achievement tests and graduate. Minorities and socially and economically disadvantaged students benefit the most from a small-school environment, he said.

Julia Smith, a University of Michigan researcher on school size, said learning in high schools tends to fall off when the head count drops below 200 or rises above 800.

Students with social and economic advantages suffer more when schools are too small to offer a broad curriculum, while they suffer more at big schools because of the lack of individual attention, she said.

"Disadvantaged kids rely more on school to keep their learning going, because they don't have as many other resources," Smith said. "What that means is that when the attention level goes down and the chaos level goes up, they're harder hit."

Marilyn Hohmann helped build the case for smaller schools as a member of a national commission that spent two years pondering ways to improve high schools. In eight years as principal of Fairdale High, Hohmann testdrove a number of those ideas.

She said the notion that big schools are better is based on an outmoded "factory model" that casts students as raw materials to be processed, sorted and selected, rather than as individuals - each a potential success story - with distinctive needs.

Hohmann, now a senior associate with the Center for Leadership in School Reform, said distance-learning technology can help remove any barriers to learning in small schools. And if Jefferson County students can't get what they need at their own schools, the elaborate busing system can transport them to another school or a local college, she said.

CORRECTION-DATE: April 7, 1999

CORRECTION:

Because of an editing error, a story Sunday misrepresented a statement by University of Michigan researcher Julia Smith about the effects of school size on high school students. Smith said students with economic and social advantages suffer more at small schools because of a narrow curriculum, while disadvantaged students suffer more at big schools because of the lack of individual attention.

LANGUAGE: English

LOAD-DATE: April 8, 1999

24TH STORY of Level 1 printed in FULL format.

Copyright 1999 Denver Publishing Company
DENVER ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

April 25, 1999, Sunday

ON: Editorial; Ed. FINAL; Pg. 1B

LENGTH: 510 words

HEADLINE: ON THE VIRTUES OF SMALLNESS

BYLINE: Vincent Carroll

BODY:

By the standards of today, Columbine is not a huge high school. It has 1,900 students, but then so do a number of other secondary schools in the metro area. Several exceed 3,000.

These large schools boast an array of facilities, from swimming pools to media centers to auditoriums, that surpass anything available even a generation ago. They field magnificent sports teams and offer a curriculum of impressive breadth. They are swarming cities of adolescents, but like cities everywhere they do have their downside: They harbor enclaves of alienated and embittered youngsters who get little attention and who feel all the more resentful for the wealth of purposeful activity buzzing about them.

I write today in praise of small schools - not as a slap at Columbine or because Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold are in any sense 'products' of a large-school culture, but because the research regarding school size does in fact offer useful lessons regarding teen disaffection.

An article by Andrew Rotherham in Education Week earlier this year sums up the wealth of studies. Although average school size has quintupled since World War II, there is little evidence that these megaschools justify their original rationale. They are probably not, for example, more efficient to run. If anything, school bureaucracies swell at least as fast as enrollments.

But cost is not our concern today. Here are the findings that should intrigue us: 'Additional research has shown that students from smaller schools have better attendance, and that when students move from large schools to smaller schools their attendance improves. Smaller schools also have lower dropout rates and fewer discipline problems. A 1992 study by Jean Stockard and Maralee Mayberry stated that 'behavior problems are so much greater in larger schools that any possible virtue of larger size is canceled out by the difficulties of maintaining an orderly learning environment.' ''

Nor has larger school size translated into more extracurricular participation. A study by Kathleen Cotton found that 'in smaller schools students are more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and to hold positions of responsibility in those activities. Moreover, she found that as school size increases, opportunities for participation increase as well but not proportionately.' ''

In other words, students are more likely to be engaged in smaller schools - and therefore less likely to lash out in frustration at others. This is no mere theoretical point: The National Center for Education Statistics in the U.S. Department of Education released a report last year on crime and violence in schools whose data clearly suggest a correlation between campus mayhem and larger schools.

The Rocky Mountain News (Denver, Co.), April 25, 1999

At the elementary school my children attend, the principal greets each and every child on arrival. Personally. Every day. Talk about a sense of community. It's not that our megaschools refuse to create such a supportive atmosphere. They can't. And therein lies the risk for some of our kids.

COLUMN

Vincent Carroll is editor of the editorial pages. He can be reached at carrollv@denver-rmn.com.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

LOAD-DATE: April 28, 1999

6TH STORY of Level 1 printed in FULL format.

Copyright 1999 The National Journal, Inc.
The National Journal

May 29, 1999

SECTION: EDUCATION; Pg. 1484; Vol. 31, No. 22

LENGTH: 1840 words

HEADLINE: For High Schools, Small Is Beautiful

BYLINE: Burt Solomon

BODY:

In the wake of the shootings at the 1,900-student Columbine High School outside of Denver and before the ones at a 1,400-student high school near Atlanta, Vice President Al Gore offered an intriguing, back-to-the-future idea in his bid to become the nation's third consecutive Education President: smaller schools.

"We've done some things wrong in education, and here's one of them: herding all students in a 2.5-square-mile area into overcrowded, factory-style high schools," Gore ventured in his May 16 commencement address at Graceland College in the politically pivotal state of Iowa. The observation was part of a litany of proposals that he claimed would add up to "truly revolutionary change" in the nation's public schools. The Vice President recommended distributing federal incentives to encourage local school districts to build small high schools or to create what education professionals call "schools within schools"--that is, dividing up the existing schools into several more-or-less autonomous units.

As for the details of what Gore has in mind, don't ask. The scope and form of the incentives, aides say, are to be figured out later. "This is the outline of an idea," says University of Maryland public policy professor William A. Galston, a former domestic policy adviser in Clinton's White House who worked on Gore's speech. Galston figures that incentives would take a form "along the lines of challenge grants," matching federal contributions to locally budgeted funds.

The idea may be undeveloped, but it isn't new. Reform-minded school systems have been experimenting with this sort of approach for many years, often with some help from foundations. Researchers have been studying it more and more over the course of the past decade. Policy fads tend toward the cyclical, and the vogue for downsizing is a reaction to the Cold War movement toward bigger--and presumably better--schools, which was impelled by worry over the state of American education after the 1957 flight of Sputnik. In pursuit of economies of scale and of

sophisticated science labs, advanced-placement courses, and other totems of educational excellence, small rural schools were consolidated into centralized behemoths as fast-growing suburbs built mega-schools. Two-fifths of the nation's secondary schools, according to Education Department figures, now enroll 1,000 or more students.

Bigger, though, is no longer assuredly better, in education or in anything else. Partly this assessment is a matter of intellectual fashion, in this desktop-computer, decentralizing, small-is-beautiful age. The smaller school "is an idea that's been around whose time has come," said Cheryl Keen, a professor of self, society, and culture at Antioch College.

But it's more than fashion. The practical evidence about the beneficial effects of smaller, more intimate schools is quite persuasive. When Education Secretary Richard W. Riley recently called in experts on school security to discuss how to make schools safer, their top recommendation had nothing to do with metal detectors or cops on the premises, but with shrinking the size of schools. Smaller schools, the thinking goes, nurture a sense of belonging and reduce the estrangement that can foster student violence.

Some of the evidence is anecdotal. Perhaps the most dramatic involves a pioneering secondary school (grades 7-12) with 450 students in East Harlem. In the worst-performing school district in New York City, the school is one of the metropolis's best, boasting a graduation rate of 90 percent and no metal detectors.

That smaller schools work is also apparent from research on a more empirical level. Citing studies that examined the records of 20,000 students in Philadelphia, 13,000 in Alaska, and almost 12,000 others nationwide, retired Hofstra University education professor Mary Anne Raywid, writing in a recent issue of Educational Leadership, described findings of "an unusual consistency" regarding the benefits of smaller schools. "In fact," she concluded, "there is enough evidence now of such positive effects--and of the devastating effects of large size on substantial numbers of youngsters--that it seems morally questionable not to act on it."

Advocates of smaller schools differ on the ideal size for a high school; the suggestions range from 400 to 900 students (and no larger than 200 to 400 for an elementary school). But they agree on the benefits. Dozens of studies have shown a connection between smaller schools--where students receive more personal attention--and such socially desirable effects as lower dropout rates, higher attendance, fewer suspensions, reduced violence, stronger scores on standardized tests, more participation in extracurricular activities (especially by "marginal" kids), and a greater likelihood to go on to college. And smaller schools, researchers say, are home to fewer, weaker

cliques, of the sort that fanned two teenagers' rage at a cost of 15 lives last month at Columbine High School.

Had Columbine been smaller and structured differently, the April massacre "could never have happened," Raywid added in an interview. Smaller schools, she explains, can convert a school from a bureaucratic to a "communal" organization, and make sure that an adult at the school "knows every kid well." If a high school teacher has 150 students for 45 minutes apiece, she says, "it's absurd to expect the teacher to know the kids and what's bothering them." At the small East Harlem school, for instance, every adult is an adviser to 12 to 15 students and meets with them daily for an hour in a group.

The East Harlem school addresses a core reality: Even in a largely prosperous and literate society, schools face a harder job than they did before. "Now we have such a screwed-up society, with both parents working and no one giving any attention (to children), we need schools that supplement the family," said Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Diane Ravitch, who was an education policy-maker in the Bush Administration.

High schools shouldn't be as big as Columbine in Colorado, Ravitch contends. A school that's too large "aids and abets kids who thrive in anonymity." These mega-schools tend to reinforce the sense of alienation already felt by children whose parents are too often absent from their lives.

To date, the Clinton Administration has made smaller classes--not smaller schools--the center of its education policy. Some champions of smaller schools sneer at this idea; putting 21 students instead of 30 in a classroom, they argue, would only aggravate the difficulty of finding enough well-qualified teachers and would still leave them lecturing at the front of the class instead of letting them teach in the creative, hands-on ways that experts in pedagogy now recommend.

Nor would smaller classes diminish the overall size and impersonal nature of mega-schools. But lately, the Administration has made a bow--rhetorically, at least--to the idea of smaller, homier schools. In its recent proposal to reauthorize the mammoth Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Administration suggests offering federal grants to help transform 5,000 American high schools over the next eight years "into places where students receive individualized attention," by encouraging smaller schools and the creation of schools-within-schools.

Smaller isn't necessarily cheaper, of course. "It wouldn't be cost-free," Galston acknowledges, but "it's relatively economic." Because smaller schools mean fewer dropouts, studies have shown that they're cheaper than bigger schools if education costs are calculated per graduating student. That, however, isn't how taxpayers think. Voters who are not eager to see their property taxes rise might balk at paying the extra dollars necessary to build smaller schools or to

reconfigure big schools into smaller pieces.

But the additional cost for bricks and mortar isn't the true obstacle that stands in the way of smaller schools. No, the real problem lies in the potential benefits and how they're distributed. The research literature shows clearly that the more impoverished the student body, the greater the advantage that comes from reducing the school's size and anonymity. Smaller schools would benefit most students, researchers say, but the poorer ones considerably more--and some of the wealthier ones hardly at all. Indeed, a 1995 study found that capable students from well-to-do homes fared better in larger schools than in smaller ones.

Such students may be few, but their parents are likely to wield more than their proportionate share of political clout. And other parents might join them. The smaller the school is, after all, the more limited will be the array of advanced-placement courses and high-powered sports facilities that ambitious parents love and sprawling suburban high schools are proud to offer.

"The dirty little secret of schools is that suburban schools, overall, are pretty damn good," an advocate of smaller schools points out. Suburban American high schools, not counting the very best and the very worst of them, rank with the finest in the world, he says, while inner-city high schools "are dead last, worse than those of any other country," even in the Third World.

For Gore, this two-track educational system creates a political dilemma. "The crisis in education isn't where the swing voters are," this advocate reasons. The urban voters who stand to benefit the most from smaller schools already tend to vote Democratic if they bother to vote at all. It's in the suburbs, where more than half of the American electorate resides and the new Democratic Party has found its critical strength, that parents may see that they have something to lose, and not much to gain, from smaller schools.

For any Democrat pursuing a political promotion, these bifurcated dynamics might provide an unsettling reminder of President Clinton's worst policy debacle--his 1993-94 attempt to revamp the health care system. Clinton's pollsters found that most Americans favored universal insurance, but they overlooked voters' widespread contentment with their own health care arrangements.

If smaller schools offer benefits but also disadvantages for comfortable suburbs, the political utility of Gore's provocative proposal may be nil. How excited will suburbanites be about a proposal to help the children in the deep, depressed areas of the cities where soccer moms fear to tread?

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

HRC Involvement/
Events and Columns

NEW YORK NETWORKS FOR SCHOOL RENEWAL

*An Annenberg
Foundation
Challenge for
New York City*

Contact Us

This Month



**Who We
Are**



**NYNSR
Schools**



**Links &
Publications**



Update

**Research
& Projects**

SPRING 1999

New York Networks for School Renewal Small Schools Manual

New York Networks will be working in collaboration with researchers at NYU, the Board of Education, and practitioners throughout the city to create a user-friendly manual for people interested in starting a new school program in New York City.

For more on this and other stories, visit our [Update](#) section, which is changed monthly.

*****NYNSR Releases "Outcomes Study" ...for more see Research & Projects**

[Who We Are](#) | [NYNSR Schools](#) | [Links](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Update](#) | [Research](#)

© New York Networks for School Renewal
1573 Madison Avenue, Room 425 | New York, NY 10029
212-369-1288 | Fax: 212-369-0765

Site created by:
DANIEL JONES