

Small Schools: Summary of Research

Overview of Recent Research on Effectiveness of Small Schools

The small schools literature began with the large-scale quantitative studies of the late 1980s & early 1990s that firmly established small schools as more productive & effective than large ones. These studies, involving large numbers of students, schools, & districts, confirmed that students learn more & better in small schools (Lee & Smith, 1995). Students make more rapid progress toward graduation (McMullan, Sipe, & Wolf, 1994). They are more satisfied with small schools, & fewer of them drop out than from larger schools (Pittman & Haughwout, 1987). Students behave better in smaller schools, which thus experience fewer instances of both minor & serious infractions Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). All of this is particularly true for disadvantaged students, who perform far differently in small schools & appear more dependent upon them for success than do more fortunate youngsters (Lee & Smith, 1995).

All of these things we have confirmed with a clarity & at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research. As one researcher summed it up, "a large body of research in the affective & social realms overwhelmingly affirms the superiority of small schools" (Cotton, 1996b). Another researcher noted that size exerts a "unique influence" on students' academic accomplishment, with a strong negative relationship linking the two: the larger the school, the lower the students' achievement levels (Howley, 1994).

Such quantitative studies have built an impressive case for smallness. And a number of literature syntheses & reviews have now displayed the findings of such extensive studies & the advantages of small schools (e.g., Cotton, 1996a; Gladden, 1998). As these studies-of-studies show, it is rare indeed to find empirical support or justification for the large high school. Even those few studies citing positive benefits of large schools for some students (e.g., Friedkin & Necochea, 1988; Howley, 1995) find such benefits to be of far less magnitude than are the disadvantages of such schools for many others (Gladden, 1998).

New Directions in Small Schools Research

Having now built a strong quantitative case for the benefits of small schools, more recent literature has moved on to other things. One of the policy questions still being debated is, "How big is small?" The recent Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform set the limits at 350 students for elementary schools & 500 for high schools (Fine & Somerville, 1998). A 1990 study of school size research recommended up to 800 students for high schools (Williams, 1990). The National Association of Secondary School Principals recommended a limit of 600 for secondary schools (1996), yet two researchers who correlated size & test score performance came up with 600-900 as the size that works best (Lee & Smith, 1997). In general, those who emphasize the importance of the school as a community tend to set enrollment limits lower than do those who emphasize academic effectiveness, at least as measured by test scores.

Other policy issues discussed in the small schools literature include governance & costs. Small diversified schools & schools-within-schools require a different sort of accountability than that in a governance system designed to control & coordinate large uniform units (Hallett, 1995). Tensions appear both at the system level with middle management (Darling-Hammond, Aness, McGregor, & Zuckerman, 1995; Meier, 1998) & at the school level with building administrators (Hendrie, 1998a; Hendrie, 1998b; Raywid, 1996a). Realizing the promise small schools offer requires more than controlling the size, it is also a matter of adopting a focus for the school (Gladden, 1998) & of restructuring practices & arrangements in the school & at the system level (Hallett, 1995; Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1997).

Another policy issue pertains to equity, both among schools & among students. This involves considering whether the small schools enjoy advantages others do not -- more selectivity, more motivated students, more cooperative families, more & better resources. A recent study of New York's famed District 4 credited the small schools there with having raised achievement levels throughout, not just in the small schools. Thus, the researchers concluded, critics' fears of creating a system of haves & have nots had not been realized (Teske, Schneider, Marschall, & Roch, 1997). A study of neighboring District 3 found that its small diversified middle schools were drawing students from across neighborhoods & decreasing the number of racially isolated schools within the district (Raywid & Kottkamp, 1996).

The issue of relative costs is receiving attention, & a first cost-benefit analysis of New York's small schools found them to be a good value, with "the quite small additional budgets...well worth the improved outputs." (Stiefel, Latarola, Fruchter, & Berne, 1998, p. 18). When viewed on a cost-per-student-enrolled basis, they are somewhat more expensive. But when examined on the basis of the number of students they graduate, they are "less" expensive than either medium-sized or large high schools. (These findings hold true for the small academic & alternative schools, but not for the more costly "last chance" alternatives or vocational schools.)

Other policy questions surfacing in the literature, as well as in public discourse, include the role of unions in relation to small schools & their needs (e.g., whether teacher selection is to be by colleagues instead of by seniority). And we are seeing demands that small schools research findings be honored in political decisions (Carnes, 1996).

Analyses (e.g., Aness, 1998; Anderson, 1998; Fine & Somerville, 1998; Raywid, 1994, 1996a) are beginning to appear of the essential elements of small schools & the traits associated with success.

Lists differ, though common themes are clearly discernible. Advocates of Chicago's Small Schools list self-selection of the faculty, some degree of autonomy, a cohesive pedagogical approach, & an inclusive admissions policy (Anderson, 1998). The Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform urges small schools to have a full curriculum, a cohesive learning environment, a staff selected at the site, a culture supportive of teachers, accountability focused on student achievement, control over educational & budgetary decisions, & a nontracked program equipping all students for the option of college or work (Fine & Somerville, 1998). There is also advice on planning & launching a new small school (Aness, 1998; Raywid, 1996b).

A number of case studies of particular small schools have been undertaken; many bear out the large-scale quantitative studies cited earlier. Other in-depth studies of individual small schools are being published to display specific features & attributes. For instance, a work on authentic assessment contains studies of four of New York's small schools -- Central Park East Secondary School, International High School, P.S. 261, & the Bronx New School -- & of Wilmington, Delaware's Hodgson Vocational Technical High School (Darling-Hammond, Aness & Falk, 1995). A work on neo-institutional theory includes a detailed study of an unsuccessful school-within-a-school effort as an illustrative case (Raywid, 1996b).

Small schools increasingly turn up in school reform literature, such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals' "Breaking Ranks: Changing An American Institution" (1996), which makes smallness an essential element. The Carnegie Corporation of New York's "Turning Points" also recommends "small communities for learning" (1989, p. 9). And Tom Sergiovanni, who has argued that schools must change their self-image & governing metaphor from organization to community, makes size a pivotal condition (1996). Similarly, much of the discussion of themed schools & focus schools presumes a small school, as does much of the literature on teacher empowerment (see, e.g., Raywid, 1994).

Many find instructional reform of virtually any sort to be contingent upon small school size (e.g., Vulliamy & Webb, 1995; Roellke, 1996). In some cities, small schools have also come to be associated with a powerful form of accountability, as large failing schools are phased out & replaced by several separate & independent small schools. As this sampling attests, smallness has been interwoven with many of today's reform themes, & with other features & conditions currently recommended for schools. Interest in & examination of small schools appear to be thriving.

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Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education & Small School. NOTE: The "Resources" at the end of this Digest have been omitted because of space. Those Resources, along with this Digest, can be found at: http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed420897.html