



OREGON LEGISLATIVE POLICY, RESEARCH, & COMMITTEE SERVICES

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Basics on . . .

Small Schools

School sizes have increased

Since World War II, the number of schools in the US has declined 70 percent, while the average size grew fivefold. More than one in four secondary schools nationwide enrolls over 1,000 students, and enrollments of 2,000 and 3,000 are not uncommon.

Many researchers trace the large-school trend back to a book written in 1967 by James Bryant Conant, then-president of Harvard. In it, he concluded that larger schools (over 750 students) can offer more comprehensive instructional programs of greater quality at lower costs than smaller schools.

Research indicates that small schools may be better

However, recent research indicates that larger is not better. Studies from the late 1980s and early 1990s established that small schools are more productive and effective than large ones. A higher percentage of students, particularly disadvantaged students, are successful when they are part of smaller, more intimate learning communities and learn more and better in small schools.¹

Some researchers believe that no secondary school should serve more than 1,000 students, and elementary schools should not exceed 300-400 students.²

Can schools be too small? Researchers Valerie Lee's and Julia Smith's analysis of student performance data and school size suggests that, ideally, high schools should have between 600 and 900 students. Their research also supported earlier findings that school size is especially important for the most disadvantaged students.³

¹ Howley (1994) reports evidence that students in high socioeconomic status communities perform better in larger schools. Small size seems to benefit minority and low-income students more than middle- and upper-class students.

² Prescriptions for size vary. Some researchers cite 400 students, while others conclude that high school students learn best when enrollment is between 600 and 900. A joint policy statement issued by the Carnegie Foundation and the National Association of Secondary School Principals recommended that high schools break into units of no more than 600 students. Howley (1996) suggests that school size might vary from place to place, with small schools emphasized in impoverished areas.

³ Lee, Valerie and Julia Smith. *High School Size: Which Works Best and for Whom?* Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis. Fall 1997, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 205-227.

How big are schools in Oregon? In Oregon, 70 high schools enroll more than 1,000 students; four schools enroll more than 2,000 students. The biggest, Westview High School in Beaverton, has an enrollment of 2,323.⁴

Oregon school sizes

	Total # of schools	# of schools over ideal ⁵	% over ideal	total # of students	total # students over ideal	% of students in schools over ideal
Elementary	742	396	53%	259,339	190,321	73.4%
Middle	197	108	55%	107,868	77,103	71.5%
High	198	70	35%	157,425	106,029	67.4%

BENEFITS OF SMALL SCHOOLS

Attendance Research has shown that students from smaller schools have better attendance rates, and that when students move from large schools to smaller ones their attendance improves.

Attitudes Student attitudes are better in small schools, including both personal and academic self-concepts. Students in small schools experience a much greater sense of belonging and a higher quality of interpersonal relations. Administrator and teacher attitudes toward work indicate that large schools appear to promote negative teacher perceptions of school administration and low staff morale. In small schools, teachers are more likely to participate in planning and analyze practice, and are likely to expend extra efforts to ensure that the students achieve and the school succeeds.

Drop out rates Smaller schools have lower dropout rates. Oregon statistics support this. The average dropout rate for schools with more than 1,000 students is 7.08 percent; for schools with 500-999 students, it is 6.42 percent; for schools with 200-499 students it is 5.89 percent; for schools with less than 200 students, the dropout rate is 4.70 percent.⁶

Academic accomplishment Research has found a strong negative relationship linking students' academic accomplishment and school size: the larger the school, the lower the students' achievement levels. Smaller schools are easier to restructure with reform strategies, and may serve as models for successful change. Small schools are often credited with innovations such as multiage classrooms, peer tutoring, and individualized instruction. In addition, accountability is enhanced as everyone knows how a student is performing academically.

Discipline problems Smaller schools have fewer discipline problems. A 1992 study by researchers stated that behavior problems are so much greater in larger schools that any

⁴ Oregon Department of Education 1999-00 enrollment figures.

⁵ "Ideal" defined as 340 students for elementary schools, 500 students for middle schools, and 1000 for high schools. These numbers suggested by UO Professor of Education Dave Conley, in the Oregon Quality Education Model.

⁶ Calculations done by author based on figures found in the Oregon Department of Education document, *Dropout Report. Appendix B: Oregon Public School Dropouts, 1995-96 By Size of School.*

possible virtue of larger size is cancelled out by the difficulties of maintaining an orderly learning environment.

Extracurricular activities

Students in smaller schools are more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and to hold positions of responsibility in those activities. Researchers point out that in small schools everyone is needed to populate teams, offices, and clubs, and that even shy and less able students are encouraged to participate and made to feel they belong. As schools grow larger, opportunities for participation also grow but not proportionately: a twenty-fold increase in population produces only a fivefold increase in participation opportunities.

Curricular adequacy

Although it is assumed that large schools provide richer curricula than small schools, studies show that neither of these is necessarily true. However, many small schools maintain programs that are comparable in quality to curricula of larger schools. In cases where deficiencies have existed, many small schools have achieved curricular adequacy through various restructuring efforts, including integration of curricula, innovative scheduling, higher education cooperatives, interdistrict sharing, and use of instructional technologies.

Efficiency

A 1996 study by researchers found that large schools are actually more expensive because their sheer size requires more administrative support. Also, additional bureaucracy translates into less flexibility and innovation. A 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." 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.

Adult connections

An important benefit of smaller schools is the closer connection students have with adults, making them less likely to fall through the cracks. In a 1996 article in *Educational Leadership*, former New York City high school principal Deborah Meier wrote that large schools breed anonymity, which, in turn, breeds anger, frustration, and a sense of disconnectedness. Data indicate that the smaller the school, the fewer incidents of violence, vandalism, and rudeness. Small schools offer what metal detectors and guards cannot: the safety and security of being where you are known well by people who care for you.

Parental support

In a 1997 Hudson Institute study of charter schools, 53 percent of parents cited small school size as the reason they chose a charter school for their child. It was the most frequent response, ahead of higher standards, education philosophy, greater parental involvement, and better teachers. Parents are more likely to form alliances with teachers who know their child and care about his or her progress.

Safety

In small school environments, strangers are easily spotted; teachers can respond quickly to student rudeness or frustration.

Other benefits

The need in small schools for everyone's involvement in school activities appears to be related to other social and affective areas. People in small schools come to know and care about one another to a greater degree than is possible in large schools, and rates of parent involvement are higher. Staff and students have a

stronger sense of personal efficacy. Small school students tend to take more responsibility for their own learning. Learning activities are more likely to be individualized, classes are typically smaller, and scheduling is much more flexible.

Instructional practices in small schools are more likely to form teacher teams, to integrate their subject matter content, employ multiage grouping and cooperative learning, and use performance assessments. Small schools also tend to emphasize learning that is experiential and relevant to the world outside of schools.

For more information

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