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SMALL SCHOOLS ACHIEVE BETTER RESULTS

by David W. Kirkpatrick, Senior Education Fellow.

Few aspects of schooling have been more thoroughly studied than the impact of school size.

Studies are virtually unanimous in concluding smaller schools are better than large ones. Among other things, attendance, achievement, participation in extracurricular activities and graduation rates go up. Dropouts, discipline problems, and gang activities go down. One study found that high schools with 2000 students average twice the dropout rate of high schools with 600.

Despite the overwhelming evidence school superintendents and school boards maintain their "edifice complex." They continue to build and operate large schools, especially at the secondary level. The January 2001 issue of the National Education Association's NEA TODAY confirmed this. It reported that more than 70 percent of public high school students are in schools enrolling over 1,000 students and half are in schools exceeding 1,500. These percentages would be higher except there are districts lacking enough students to fill big schools.

Forty years ago, Roger Barker and Paul Gump, in their book *Big School, Small School*, noted hundreds of studies pointing out the advantages of smaller schools. Only in recent years has there been the emergence of a movement that paid attention. In 1997, Hawaii, which has no school districts or, if you prefer, has only one, the entire state, approved a policy limiting enrollment to 550 students in elementary schools, 600 in intermediate schools and 1,000 for high schools. This applies to new schools but they also began to look at dividing some of their existing 245 schools into smaller units.

More recently, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has taken on the task of supporting smaller schools. So far they have given more than \$400 million toward this end. This includes \$12 million to Chicago in 2001 and more than \$51 million to New York City last fall. The New York City grant is to fund 67 small, theme-based high schools each of which would have a maximum of 500 students.

Chicago, with some 440,000 students in 600 schools initiated a small schools effort long before it received the Gates Foundation grant. In 1995 the district adopted a small schools resolution, and the first eight such schools opened the next year. These included Best Practices High School, with a bit more than 400 students. Although 76 percent of its mostly Black and Hispanic students are low income, 84 percent graduate, compared to a citywide average of 67 percent, and 70 percent go on to college.

In April 2002 the district adopted a resolution encouraging any school to apply for restructuring as small schools. It also has a High School Redesign Project to oversee the process. The city now has some 150 schools with less than 400 students. A report a few years ago found they had better attendance, higher grades and lower dropout rates than the district's larger schools.

Many communities have of necessity long had successful small schools.

In Colorado's Boulder Valley, one mountain elementary school has one teacher and 18 students, while a second has two teachers and 30 students. In each case the school buildings serve as community centers and state education officials have commended the schools for high levels of academic achievement. Significantly, when the students move on to the larger middle schools in Boulder they consistently make the honor rolls.

In Washington, PA, a small k-12 private school has only 86 students, 35 at the high school level. While it lacks interscholastic sports it excels in other areas, such as speech and debate in which it regularly send students to national competition.

Or consider the new International Community School in Oakland, California. Eighty percent of its 238 K-5 students are Latino, half have limited English skills and 90 percent qualify for free or reduced lunches. In its first year of operation it set a goal of improving its Academic Performance Index from 545 to 558, up thirteen points. Instead, student achievement soared to 646, up 101 points. This compares to 479 points at a nearby elementary school with similar challenges of language and poverty but with 900 students.

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