

Small Schools White Paper THE GRAUER SCHOOL

Small Schools, Very Big Gains -- A White Paper
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"Smaller, more intimate learning communities consistently deliver better results in academics and discipline when compared to their larger counterparts. Big schools offer few opportunities to participate" (Washington Post, 8/15/02).

"Students at large schools are more prone to be alienated from their peers or engage in risky behavior" (University of Minnesota research, Los Angeles Times, 4/12/02).

Recently I introduced the idea of a "small school movement" in some "Grauer School Weekly Newsletters." In this white paper, I'd like to provide you with actual research behind this movement.

Research shows overwhelmingly that small schools lead to greater student academic gains and personal adjustment. In fact, data justifying this has been available for decades; it's just that policy makers have largely ignored it, no doubt due to the costs of such programs (and, of course, the politics). Right now, armed guards, metal detectors, and expulsions fail to get to the heart of the problem. (To a serious extent, they can actually create repressive conditions which make the problem worse.) Consequently, many people are looking for another way, and small schools can't be ignored much longer.

But first, let's clarify what a small school is: Definitely less than 400 students. At half that size it's even easier to see the benefits (Gregory, 2000). Much data on small schools has been lost by poor definitions of the small school. Often schools of between 500-800 are the "smaller" sizes recommended by school boards, but schools of this size simply can not offer the level or relationships or personalization seen in the true small school. Schools of over 400 or 500 students tend to remain comprehensive, maintaining the design features and teaching methodologies of the large school. No gain. Even if you have a school of 400 students, if that school features large class sizes, a departmentalized faculty, and teacher talk taking up 80 percent of the class time, that's not a small school—it's still a comprehensive school. Shrinking a large comprehensive school is not the answer. The small school does not attempt to be all things to all people.

The Research:

Recently (in 2001), a study of students in 90 small schools showed significant improvements in behavior and achievement. Here are some other findings:

- Students were absent much less, dropped out at nearly half the rate, had higher grade point averages, and improved reading scores by almost a half-year grade equivalency more than large schools (Wasley et al., 2000).
- Students felt safer and more connected with adults, and teachers reported higher job satisfaction.

Almost two-thirds of the country see reducing the number of pupils in each class as the best path to better schools, an idea favored by Democrats in Congress and former President Clinton. Attention spans wane as students get farther than 12 feet from the teacher, says Professor Lackney, and students in the front and center have been shown to have higher test scores. Of course, children who are less serious about achievement do tend to seek the anonymity of the rear rows.

Teachers also felt a greater connection with parents, and they reported more opportunities to collaborate with other teachers—and teachers both desire and deserve this professional autonomy. Here are related facts

that are almost impossible to ignore:

- Small school teachers surveyed were using a greater variety of instructional strategies to interest students. For you standardization mavens,
- **students in small schools outperformed students in large schools on standardized achievement tests, significantly** (Raywid, 1997/8, p. 34; Bryuk & Driscoll, 1998).
- Students in small schools get more units before graduating high school.
- Also according to the research, small schools are safer, reporting fewer fights and no incidents of serious violence (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

The push for smaller schools took on a greater sense of urgency after the horrific 1999 shooting at Colorado's Columbine High School (and subsequent shootings). Many observers are convinced that the school's large size—almost 2,000 students—helped create an atmosphere of isolation and anonymity for some students, particularly outcasts like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the murderers (October 2001, *Breaking Up Is Hard To Do*, David Hill, *Teacher Magazine*). After the Columbine incident, Colorado Governor Bill Owens formed a commission to assess how law enforcement, school officials, and others responded to the shooting and to identify the key factors that may have contributed to it. The 174-page report acknowledges that "the task of coping with school rage" is difficult at large schools, where students "tend to feel marginalized and less a part of a school community" than students at smaller schools. The commission concluded that "it is difficult for administrators in large schools to create a supportive atmosphere for students."

The size of the student body alone does not make a good school, of course. But there are things that can occur in small groups that can't in big ones. Research shows that in small schools, relationships between students and adults are strong and ongoing. There is much more advising going on, either formally or informally. Any Grauer School student can tell you that. This leads to a clearer path to graduation and postgraduate plans. Secondly, relationships with parents are strong and ongoing. Thirdly, small schools have a leaner administrative structure, so that the whole faculty shares decision-making. This fact explains why teachers in small schools feel a greater sense of efficacy—they really have a say!

The research is thickening quickly: In a review of more than 100 studies and evaluations, Kathleen Cotton, a researcher with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, recently noted, "Research has repeatedly found small schools to be superior to large schools on most measures and equal to them on the rest. This holds true for both elementary and secondary students of all ability levels and in all kinds of settings." Just two years ago, in fact, the Northwest Regional Laboratory selected The Grauer School as one of 37 exemplary schools nationwide.

One powerful but little known outcome of small schools is: **students actually have more choices in their learning**. In larger schools, teachers cannot honor individual learning styles or help individual students with personalized learning activities anywhere near as well as they can in small schools. One of my favorite aspects of the small school is that the school develops its own, unique culture. The culture of small schools typically revolves around hard work, high aspirations, respect for others, and the expectation that all students will succeed. Sound familiar? As I'm sure many of you have noticed by now, much of the above research reads like The Grauer School catalogue.

Smaller schools engage the community in educating students. Research confirms what is easy to observe daily at The Grauer School, that internships are much more common, and community members get to know the students. Some small schools even engage community members in evaluating curricular exhibits such as

portfolios.

The Myths

Why do we keep building gigantic schools when we have such promising data? Torrey Pines High School just added a large wing that will bring that school up to around 4000 students. Our local "small school," San Dieguito High School Academy, has 1300 students—hardly intimate. Here's one big reason the data are ignored: cultural expectations about high school are deeply embedded. Wasley and Lear explain it like this: Our collective memory of high school includes nostalgia such as proms, football games, exciting social lives, romance, and first cars. No matter that such memories do not apply to most students. The average high school student does not attend sporting events; indeed the larger the school, the smaller the percentage of student participation in these activities. For most students, the social scene in large high schools is tough and unforgiving, with sharp distinctions made between the small group of social haves and the far larger masses of have-nots. And high school memories seldom include a significant academic component, let alone an intellectual one (2001). In other words, many high schools have activities that everyone speaks of with pride—sacred cows like the marching band, the lacrosse team, the boosters. These untouchable activities represent the school's image, and they can't be changed, even though they serve a very small percentage of students and rarely have any connection to the most basic thing of all: the focus on student learning.

A profound irony pervades our country: for around 20 years, our "post-industrial" nation's most successful businesses have been adopting team approaches, quality circles, small work groups, and more horizontal management structures. And our country went through its greatest period of prosperity in history. During this same time, an educational movement towards standardization, rigid management, and economy of scale has put the small school movement far outside consideration in stated education funding formulas.

Luckily, a few people are starting to look at the obvious. Huge non-profit foundations such as the Joyce Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trust, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are now funding many schools with caps of 400 students. And the 2001 federal budget contains grant money for districts willing to create smaller schools (<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SLCP/>). In our own small school, we can take initiatives. Nothing is sacred except the relationship between the teacher and the student. For our second decade at The Grauer School, we shall continue to create learning environments and physical spaces that students need in order to work more closely with caring adults who challenge them to succeed, one at a time.

Parents with children at a very large high school should look at this research as a set of signposts pointing to areas in which a smaller-scale, more personal approach can make a positive difference in their children's education. Students deserve to be free from worry about personal safety and to be confident that their teachers and administrators know them well and can guide their development of skills and knowledge.

For complete footnotes of this paper — — — — —

Also: For the latest information on the small school movement: check out these articles: Educational Leadership, March 2001, Wasley and Lear.

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2001/04/01/MN120526.DTL>

Students experience a greater sense of belonging and are more satisfied with their schools (Cotton, 1996, <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SLCP/resources.html#cotton>).

Fewer discipline problems occur (Raywid, 2000, <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SLCP/resources.html#raywind00>).

Crime, violence and gang participation decrease (Cushman, 1997,

<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SLCP/resources.html#cushman>).

Incidences of alcohol and tobacco abuse decrease (Klonsky, 1998,

<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SLCP/resources.html#klonsky>).

Dropout rates decrease and graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment rates increase (Funk and Bailey, 1999).

Student attendance increases (Klonsky, 1998, <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SLCP/resources.html#funk>).