# Blue Sky Paper on Being Small

**An Excerpt from *How Much Does a Great School Cost?***

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All roads in this examination of great schools leads back to small schools, and while it may seem plausible that larger schools save money, this is a huge assumption, as there is little if any peer-reviewed research to back up such a claim. Furthermore, the goal of education is not to save money, but to build a stronger society. There are many reasons why small schools are better than larger schools. Hylden (2005) outlined his rational for a nationwide case that answers the question: "What's so big about small schools?" His claim that, "a growing body of data now shows clearly that small schools, by nearly all significant measurements, outperform large schools" is backed up by the research that indicates that students:

- perform better academically;
- graduate at higher levels;
- are more likely to attend college;
- earn higher salaries later on in life;
- participate more in extracurricular activities;
- have better rates of attendance;
- report greater positive attitudes toward learning; and,
- are less likely to face school-related crime and violence.

Hylden (2005) also noted that teachers:

- report greater job satisfaction;
- are more likely to feel as if they are succeeding in their work'
- are often more able to identify problems;
- respond innovatively and effectively; and.
- adapt to change.

This study concluded that parents and relatives in small schools "are more likely to become involved in the school." Being deliberately small can enhance a sense of community within and beyond the school walls. "…neighborhoods in which small towns are found," according to Hylden, provide: "a central meeting place and source of activity, building community ties and relationships, enhancing the democratic process through mutual goal-setting and decision-making, providing added economic activity, and acting as a source for community pride and identity." The litmus test for me, in a principal role, was whether, or not, I knew the names of all my students in the school. A place 'where everyone knows your name' is a community. Ideally, a school principal can know about 300 students at one time, an ideal limit of a small school. While some K-12 small schools may have upwards of 600 to 700 students, such numbers would require an upper and lower school leader to oversee smaller communities within the larger whole.

Supporters of large schools often lose sight of the ideal safety conditions in small schools. According to Grauer & Ryan (2018): "students in smaller schools fight less, feel safer, come to school more frequently, and report being more attached to their school." Their view that: "It is impossible to dismiss school size as a powerful and fundamental indicator of safety" is difficult to refute. The social dynamics are significantly different in schools where you can feel anonymous. According to Nathan & Thao (2001): "Students at large schools are more prone to be alienated from their peers." Colleges and universities tend to have students on larger campuses, and while sometimes they are broken down into smaller groupings in specific faculties, it can be challenging for students in large universities to feel a sense of community. In the world of work, there are large corporations whose employees rarely see their leader, but departments often develop a sense of community in smaller workplaces. Does it make sense for schools to emulate the potential 'bigness' and disconnectedness before young people reach adulthood? Columbine and Parkland were 'superschools'. Larmer (2018) shared the following concern:

> I noted the size of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School: over 3000 students. Columbine High School in 1999 had almost 2000 students. The shooters in these places were alienated young men. In schools of that size, how many students are well known by the adults there? Not many. How can teachers know and care for their students when they might see 150 or more a day in five or six classes on a 50-minute bell schedule? They can't. The size and structure of the factory-model high school is part of the problem.

Raywid (1999) determined that there is "reliable evidence of the positive effects of small school size on student success," as well as, the "devastating effects of large size on substantial numbers of youngsters" (p. 3). Studies comparing results of standardized tests indicate that students from smaller schools outperform students from larger schools (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Gladden, 2000; Howley, Strange & Bickel, 2000; Husbands and Beese, 2004; Lee & Smith, 1997; Raywid, 1980).

Apart from the accumulated research on the value of schools, decision makers in education would be well advised to read the assembled material about small schools on the *Community Work Institute.org* website. Perhaps, such understandings might help reverse, or slow down, the trend in many districts of building new "superschools" while shutting down smaller ones. While it seems commonsense that having larger physical plants saves money, there is no research that supports such a claim. School expenses, large or small, are profoundly tied to human capital, and to date, I am unaware of any studies that confirm that money is saved by closing small schools. According to Grauer (2018), while some research is scattered and unreliable, there are findings that reveal that: "larger schools with enrollments in excess of 1,200 have not produced expected economies of scale that result in better lower per-pupil costs when compared to true small schools" (p. 7).

While increasing the number of students in a school tends to be the most popular way of building the revenue portion of a budget, it is important to weigh the potential benefits and disadvantages of growing a larger school. From my experience, it is more difficult to assure quality control of staffing in a larger physical plant. If exceptional teaching is central to learning, then a school leader needs to be able to know how each staff member is improving. The larger the number of

students, the larger the leadership team needed to manage the span of control. To effectively manage and lead people, the supervisory ratio should not exceed 10 employees to one administrator. A school with 300 teachers would require over 30 people to manage and mentor such a large group, stressing the budget to accommodate for leadership stipends beyond a teaching salary. These kinds of costs are rarely calculated by people who see large schools as a source of savings; and, when decision-makers increase the span of control beyond 10 people, then the quality of teaching can be at risk.

Rather than increase numbers of students and teachers, the option of deliberately keeping schools small (20-300 students) should be a serious discussion. In a charter school leadership role, I was acutely aware that admitting fewer students would make the environment more conducive for improving the teaching and learning culture. This was problematic in one jurisdiction because the overall charter system rewarded schools for increasing numbers; a decision to stabilize the population would influence a lower score on the charter school board 'report card'. Many schools have grown too big to support all the community members on the inside.

Ethan Levine's graduate thesis at Harvard featured hexagonal classroom designs that support key changes in Nepal's schooling that were different from "British-colonial design paradigms: "our Diyalo classrooms break away from existing hierarchies and preconceptions about student-teacher relationships to promote interaction in non-traditional ways" (p. 7). The plan to replicate these designs includes the building of small schools.

> Our new school, outlined below, will serve 200 students. We hope to build capacity to construct 200-student schools per year, totally 10,000 students served within a decade. In time, we believe our method could even be adopted at a national level to being the necessary educational overhaul Nepal so desperately needs (p. 2).

Given that human capital expenses, for the most part, harness the largest proportion of a budget, it might make sense economically, for larger schools to have a reduction in non-teaching staff. However, as the number of pupils increase, so do the numbers of highest paid staff needed to provide oversight of students and staff. For instance, the 'superschools' do not save money by having fewer Vice Principals; in fact, some of these schools budget for upwards of five individuals. In the same vein, more guidance counsellors, special education staff, and custodians are needed to address the larger footprint of the school. Students still require classrooms with ideal teacher: student ratios; so long as the number of students increase, so will the need to staff a school to meet their needs. The notion that 'superschools' save taxpayer dollars is a myth.

Research from Slate & Jones (2005) confirms that: "Increasing school size, especially beyond 400 students, does not typically result in a large increase in curricular offerings." When school leaders work creatively to staff schools and build schedules, students in small schools have the potential to reap comparable curricular benefits. According to Grauer (2018), "an exhaustive course and club catalog is not fundamental as a determinant of excellent schooling, nor is it a proven way to accommodate diverse student tastes and interests" (p. 7).

There are only so many jerseys for members of the basketball team or instruments for band members. In a small school, there are better odds for individuals to access extra-curricular activities.

Fouts, Abbott & Baker (2002) found that small schools helped to reduce racial and social isolation, which counters the assumption that large schools have better opportunities for socialization. Concerned that students with low socioeconomic backgrounds did not participate as much in school activities, O'brien & Rollefson (1995) reported: "This participation gap is a cause for concern, especially if extracurricular activities can be a means of bringing at-risk students more fully into the school community, thereby increasing their chances of school success." All students have more opportunities to engage in small schools.

When comparing the fiscal costs of small and large schools, it is rare to read about costs associated with:

- Increased dropout rates in large schools;
- Increased violence in large schools;
- Decreased sense of social safety and connectedness in large schools;
- Lower teacher satisfaction and higher teacher turnover in large schools;
- Lower achievement in college from students in large schools; and,
- Less happiness of students in large schools

Yet, these realities come with significant costs to society. Given that these are not fixed costs, they are rarely considered in comparative calculations that simplify things, such as the difference in volume of heated spaces. Many formulas for convincing school boards to shut down smaller schools "tend to disguise tremendous non-cash costs associated closely with large schools" (Grauer, 2018).

How can you put a price tag on a schools' influence on community growth or higher future incomes? And, how can the long-term costs of ignoring mental health needs come without social-economic costs? Given that schooling can affect a nation's productivity, it becomes important to debate whether large or small schools matter.

**Grappling with Ideas**

Discuss the following quote: "*we simply must consider whether a century of consolidations creating larger and larger campuses has been a grave miscalculation. The creation of large schools appears to have created or perpetuated the problems it was meant to solve"* ~ Dr. Stuart R. Grauer

Discuss the following question "*Why do we keep the focus on building gigantic schools when we now have over 30 years of promising small schools' data*?" ~ Dr. Joe Brooks

Discuss Dr. Grauer's questions:

- What if we found out that mixing students of diverse neighborhoods into large schools only creates additional grouping and alienation?
- Could it be that what we should have been doing is creating integrated small schools rather than lumping everyone into the comprehensive, edge of town model?