

## School Size in Support of Large High Schools or Not!

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### Argument in Support of Large High Schools

Throughout the United States school districts are struggling with increased student body enrollment. Unfortunately, as the population has risen, the number of new schools fails to keep the same pace. This phenomenon is especially true with high schools. One can claim that the answer is simple – build more schools to reduce the number of large, overcrowded schools. Although there is much evidence to support small high schools and their benefits (as noted in the counter-argument below), many communities lack the resources necessary to build more schools. And, most importantly, large high schools offer many benefits over smaller ones.

Large high schools offer a wider range of courses that reflects the interests of a diverse student body. For example, Evanston Township High School located in Illinois has an enrollment of 3,100 students and a budget of \$67 million, which allows them to offer four years of Latin, German, Hebrew and Japanese, and two years of American Sign Language. In addition to foreign language, the social studies department offers a popular course on Asian history and many students are studying African history as part of their global studies curriculum (Allen, 2002). Likewise, with a large student body, the number of athletic and co-curricular programs opportunities increase. These large high schools can carry approximately 20 different teams.

Instead of focusing on the fiscally improbable solution of building enough high schools in California, attention should be drawn to making large high schools function better for students and teachers. One method of creating a small school feeling in a large school environment is implementing Schools-Within-Schools (Berkey, 1996, October). A small school population is less of a factor in improving the academic, personal, and social development of students than investing resources in improving school programs. The Schools-Within-Schools organizational model restructures the institution to provide students with individual attention while capitalizing on the vast array of opportunities provided by large schools. Opponents of large high schools criticize that students are alienated and not fully engaged, therefore, high drop out and failure rates occur at these school sites. The structure and organization of large high schools make them more susceptible to many problems (Noguera, 2002). If large high schools are restructured into environments similar to the Schools-Within-Schools model, students will receive more individual attention and experience an increased sense of belonging.

Let us not forget the vital role that teachers play in touching the lives of students. At the top of the list of concerns expressed by teachers each year, class size rather than school size is at the top. In addition, parents often worry more about the increase in class size than the growth of large high schools (Johnson, 2002). Although the size of the school is important, it is the experience students undergo in the classroom that makes the most significant difference. Teachers are responsible for creating a positive classroom culture where their students feel recognized and valued (Allen, 2002).

A more practical and fiscally responsible means of improving high schools is restructuring and improving them to capture the benefits of both large and small effective schooling practices.

### Argument in Support of Smaller High Schools

In an era of school accountability where student success and student safety are foremost, the California Governor has through legislation advocated that class size reduction is the single most powerful avenue by which to achieve those objectives. Yet, another powerful reform might also accomplish the goals of student success and student safety--school size.

Interestingly, since the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the shift in school size has gone from small to large with the one-room school nearly vanishing. The number of school districts has also dropped as districts have consolidated to form larger districts (Hampel, 2002, January). Currently, over fifty percent of American high schools are in the 500-2,500 student range. Some of the largest high schools number 3,000-5,000 in student population (Allen, 2002). However, Johnson (2002, February) found that the most effective size for high schools is the 600-900 student population range.

There are major benefits to smaller high schools. First, is the student perception of belonging that leads to reduced school violence (Klonsky, 2002, February). Klonsky believes students don't get lost in the crowd because they have an increased sense of identity and community. This increased sense of belonging found by Galletti (1999, May) was shown to reduce students' sense of alienation while increasing their confidence, self-esteem and a sense of responsibility. Metal detectors are replaced with teachers who know every student's name. In Providence, Rhode Island, the Met, a public high school of 200 students, has one-eighteenth the rate of disciplinary suspensions compared to other Providence high schools (Klonsky, 2002, February). According to Klonsky (2002, February) James Garbarino, Director of the Family Life Development Center and professor of human development at Cornell University, once said in regard to increased school violence, "At the adolescent level, if I could do one single thing, it would be to ensure that teenagers are not in a high school larger than 400 to 500 students." (66).

Secondly, student participation increases in smaller schools. Vander Ark (2002, February) found that smaller schools have higher attendance rates and lower drop out rates. Not only is attendance increased, but so is participation in extra-curricular activities. As far back as 1964 researchers reported that students in small schools were more likely to be involved in extra-curricular activities. Although large schools may have more selection, proportionately, small schools have more student involvement.

While the research is not conclusive that smaller schools have higher student achievement, the research has shown better achievement for ethnic-minority and low socioeconomic students. A study of schools in four states found that students in less-affluent areas achieve higher levels when they attend small schools, and in lower-income communities, the benefit of smaller schools is even greater (Vander Ark, 2002, February). Students succeed in school when they connect with an adult or a subject. Today's large high schools are not working; let's rethink what is best for kids.

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