

SMALLER LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Research Summary

I. Definition

Smaller learning communities are schools with lower student populations, generally delineated as follows:

Elementary: 300-400 students

Middle/High: 400-800 students

These school sizes can be created in a number of different ways: a free-standing school, a larger school that re-constitutes as one or more smaller schools, or a school within a school, alternately referred to as an academy, a pod, a building, a team, or a cohort.

II. Background

A. History

1. 1940-1990: number of K-12 schools in the U.S. decreased by 70% while the enrollment quintupled.
2. Big philosophy: bigger schools are more efficient, and offer more curricular opportunities.
3. Small philosophy: smaller schools engender connectivity; they re-create the value of the family around the dinner table.

B. Funding for Smaller Learning Communities

1. Federal grants began in 2000
2. Gates and Annenberg funding around the same time

III. Research Results: Smaller vs. Larger

A. Academic

1. Small school students perform as well or better than large school students
2. Measures include all conventional means of assessing academic achievement

B. Other Measures

1. Students in small schools out-perform students in large schools on all the following measures
 - a. graduation rate
 - b. attendance rate
 - c. behavior: lower incidences of all types of negative behavior, including truancy, class disruption, vandalism, aggressive behavior, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation
 - d. extra-curricular participation

C. Conclusion

1. Researchers note that small school size in itself does not account for the positive differences indicated.
2. Rather, the factors that attach to small schools – quality of the social environment, students' attachment to the school, personal connections, sense of community, shared vision – account for the differences between small and large schools.

IV. References

- Boss, Suzie. 2000. *Big Lessons on a Small Scale* [electronic]. [retrieved 30 July 2009]. Available from http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/winter_00/1.html.
- Chicago Public Schools. 2003. *Small Schools Get Results* [electronic]. [retrieved 30 July 2009]. Available from <http://smallschools.cps.k12.il.us/research.html>.
- Johnson, Jerry D., Craig B. Howley, and Aimee A. Howley. 2002. *Small Works in Arkansas: How Poverty and the Size of Schools and School Districts Affect School Performance in Arkansas* [electronic]. [retrieved 29 July 2009]. Available from <http://eric.ed.gov>.
- Robelen, Eric W. 2000. *Administration Has Big Plans for Small-Schools Initiative* [electronic]. [retrieved 29 July 2009]. Available from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2000/02/09/22small>
- Shah, Seema, Kevitha Medratta, and Sara McAlister. 2009. *Building a Districtwide Small Schools Movement: Oakland Community Organizations* [electronic]. [retrieved 30 July 2009]. Available from <http://www.piconetwork.org/admin/documents/files/0016>.
- Wagner, Tony. 2001. *The Case for New Village Schools* [electronic]. [retrieved 30 July 2009]. Available from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2001/12/05/14wagner.h21.html>.