

## SMALL SCHOOLS FOR SUCCESS

### *Quality of Learning*

Contrary to the current school of thought that larger schools are superior and more cost efficient there is a large body of research which argues strongly that smaller schools provide a superior environment for effective learning, teaching and economic deficiencies.

Research conducted in the USA in recent years have proven that large schools compared to small schools provide:

- Higher administrative costs
- Higher Maintenance costs
- Increased transportation costs
- Lower graduation rates
- Higher rates of vandalism
- Higher rates of absenteeism
- Lower teacher satisfaction

(Dollars and Sense: The Cost Effectiveness of Smaller Schools, Barbara Kent Lawrence, 2002)

As my experience as a secondary school teacher, Vice Principal and Principal of a large secondary school in Northern Ontario (1500 students) I would argue strongly that secondary schools with smaller populations provide a more meaningful environment for learning and promotes a higher achievement rate for students.

In addition, as a Faculty Advisor to students enrolled in the Faculty of Education at Nipissing University, I have had the experience of evaluating student-teachers in "super-school" settings in Southern Ontario. These experiences combined with acquired research information is the foundation for my belief that school boards should avoid building large super-school structures.

The argument for creating smaller school environments is simply based on a belief that a most effective learning condition for students is established on the basis of a close relationship between student and teacher, and between student and the school environment. Generating an environment of genuine caring and mutual obligation between teachers and students is found less frequently in larger schools.

A small school environment creates a condition where not only is the student identified and known by the classroom teacher but also is known by most of the school staff. This sense of identity produces an increased sense of self-worth and self-confidence which results in higher academic performance. It also promotes a higher sense of accountability for student behaviour.

In a large school environment, where there is a lower sense of self-identity, often the student feels at a loss, a sense of not being known, and interprets the school as a non-caring environment to which there is no sense of accountability. Drop-out rates are higher in larger school settings. American authorities on student drop-outs consistently report that students don't care because they do not feel valued

Where students experience a sense of caring they develop a sense of motivation because everyone supports them. The smaller the school environment, the higher there is a sense of identity and self-worth.

My experiences in a "super school" environment suggest that students outside the classroom are anonymous. Walking into this kind of school setting is like walking into a shopping mall where you may meet someone who knows you, but for the most part you are anonymous.

In discussions with the school administrators of one particular school, where there were five Vice Principals, their roles constituted literally putting out fires, working with police and social workers, investigating vandalism, and addressing staff and student social issues. They had very little responsibility for improving the classroom instruction.

In addition, the staff in the larger secondary school did not know each other as a general staff. Their professional acquaintances were for the most part centred on their department. Staff meetings were too large to convene so they depended for the most part on departmental meetings. They too lacked a sense of school identity.

### ***Economic Considerations***

As a former school superintendent with the former Nipissing Board of Education I have familiarity with school board budgets. The largest cost component to a school board budget is Human Resources. Depending on the individual board, the human resource costs can vary from 60 to 80%. These costs are dictated for the most part by collective agreements between the school board and its participating unions. These agreements do not distinguish work locations; they apply wherever the employee works. Therefore, whether they are large or small schools, the costs remain relatively the same. Therefore, there is no saving in human resources costs by consolidating schools. Costs for administrators would not change significantly; the elimination of Principal positions is offset by the addition of several Vice Principals.

Transportation costs may increase because there will be an increase in the number of students who will require transportation to one location.

The "density factor", an increase in student population centred in one building, increases the rate of student vandalism and therefore, increases costs.

### ***Summary***

While the large argument for consolidating schools is largely economic, I would strongly suggest that these perceived economic gains be compared to the loss of student achievement and quality of learning in school classrooms. There is a quantity of research that smaller schools are also more economical, (Educational Planning, Craig B. Howley, Educational Planning). The campaign for building smaller schools structured and designed to forge more meaningful connections between students and teachers in a concerted effort to boost student achievement is supported by a raft of research. Super-sized secondary schools are dens of anonymity for students...not a healthy environment for student learning.

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