

## Address to the Near North District School Board (June 12 2017)

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today on the issue of secondary school consolidation in this board. I am the incoming chair of Graduate Studies in Education at Nipissing University, but I will not be addressing to you today in any formal capacity, rather as a concerned citizen and academic. I have spent the better part of my life studying the issue of how to best educate the population of Canada, and have recently focused my attention on the benefits and detriments of employing larger schools. Today, I will present some of those findings.

Since the post-war period, the “consolidation movement” has held sway in North America unabated in its aim of creating schools of ever increasing sizes in both the elementary and secondary levels. First, due to the baby boom of the 1950s, larger schools were promoted to solve issues related to unprecedented student numbers. Then, once the boom had passed, it has been the Ministry of Education’s consistent panacea to help deal with the shortfall. However, the old arguments put forward by this ideology have now been scrutinized enough that an increased school size must be questioned before any leap is made. Through a review of the literature, most research in the past 50 years has strongly indicated that once a school surpasses its optimum size, the costs become very high indeed (and I mean that in many senses). Before I outline those costs, however, I would like to take a moment to make an operational definition of just what is meant by an “optimal size” for a secondary school. For this discussion, I think the best source for this student number should be taken from the meta-analysis conducted by OISE researchers Kenneth Leithwood and Doris Jantzi in 2009, a study that I believe is beyond reproach, and one in which this board has now become familiar. They conclude that:

*Secondary schools serving exclusively or largely diverse and/or disadvantaged students should be limited in size to about 600 students or fewer, while those secondary schools serving economically and socially heterogeneous or relatively advantaged students should be limited in size to about 1,000 students. (p. 464)*

Leithwood and Jantzi are saying nothing radical by this statement, and are much in line with every Ministry of Education administrator I have interviewed over the years. So, having established this number (1,000) as a general guide, I would like to give a quick overview of research responding to the 4 justifications that the “larger schools” movement has put forward, examining each one in turn. I include the reference list as appendices to this review.

### **A. Student Achievement**

One of the main pillars of the consolidation movement has been the belief that larger schools will result in higher student achievement. While this does hold true up to the *optimal* number, research has shown that after this point academic achievement peaks and then the opposite effect quickly takes hold. A number of important studies have clearly shown that Math and Reading scores decline at a steady rate as school size increases, especially when examining socio-economically disadvantaged students and students with learning disabilities. Even those studies showing some academic gains made by large schools (usually within homogenous populations) have been successfully refuted due to the fact that these samples ignored students who had dropped-out, or otherwise fell through the cracks. These drop-out numbers, in fact, appear to rise significantly as student numbers climb within a school. Inevitably, it would seem, that as the school size increases so does an achievement gap between the subgroups within the school.

### **B. Curriculum**

Another pillar of the consolidation argument is that the increased numbers would allow for more specialized teams of teachers with an accompanying enhanced curriculum, including extra-curricular activities. However, since the late 1980s, research has shown time and again that scale economy sources are exhausted at relatively small enrollment levels, allowing only trivial gains in curricular comprehensiveness. Many argue that school climate, not size determines curriculum. Much depends, as well, on the willingness of teachers to design innovative courses or participate in extra-curricular activities. And as the scholar Gerald Unks (1989) aptly states “it is easier to alter the process at a craftsman’s bench than on an assembly line.”

### C. Community

The belief that a larger school will engender a stronger, more diverse community is perhaps the weakest argument of the four justifications presented here. For this reason, it has been successfully undercut by generations of research who argue that while larger schools may bring more people together, it will undoubtedly include a greater rate of social disorder. I will not detail the various manifestations that these issues may take, suffice to list the ones a school administrator would have to deal with should the building exceed its optimum size:

- An increasingly negative school environment and a weaker school culture
- An increase in various forms of violence (specifically fighting, bullying, assaults and aggravated assaults) as well as an increased perception of imminent violence
- An increase in incidents of vandalism
- A reduction of safety and the perception of safety
- Various forms of student withdrawal including higher absenteeism
- An increased amount of clique-ism, gangs and isolationism
- Increasingly unsatisfied/negative teachers (ie., about their responsibility for students' learning)
- Less parental involvement (due to lack of proximity and necessary top-down structure)
- Less volunteerism in general and a decline in overall collective responsibility

### D. Efficiency

Finally, when all other pillars fail, the stalwarts of the large school movement cling to the belief of economies of scale; that “per-pupil”, larger schools are more efficient and cost-saving. However, recent research has successfully argued that the hidden costs of larger school buildings outstrip the economic benefits derived from their construction. Dr. Barbara Kent Lawrence’s 2002 work *Dollars & Sense* showed that the ongoing expenses of higher administrative overhead, higher maintenance costs, increased transportation costs, and higher rates of vandalism would render larger buildings more expensive in the long run. Since this book has been written a host of publications have emerged to support the cost effectiveness of smaller over larger school constructions. Of special note was the finding that, on the whole, smaller school building projects tended to overestimate the original costs, resulting in savings, while larger projects tended to underestimate the original costs, resulting in considerable overruns. Furthermore, the new planned larger schools were oversized when actual enrollments were considered, making them more expensive per student.

### Conclusion

In short, despite massive consolidations of schools in the United States and Canada, there is little convincing evidence on how consolidation (past an optimum student number) actually benefits education districts in the long-run.

On a personal note, for a number of years I acted as a teacher candidate supervisor, visiting schools in both rural and urban areas. I specifically remember seeing students in what is presently the largest school in the province, Earl Haig in Toronto. Even for a professor this school, with just over 2,000 Grade 9-12 students was quite intimidating with a feel of the Eaton Centre rather than a school. It took up an entire city block and acted more as a city unto itself than anything else. An army of administrators was needed just to run the place. It was cut into various parts with regular blockades to keep students corralled in certain areas. It could take 15 minutes to get from one class to another. The bells had to be precisely timed to simply keep the place functioning. And, at the end of the school day, as I waited outside, the wave after wave of students leaving the building produced a feeling of panic to the unprepared. And this was at a school where all students walked home. Perhaps this is why, if you look at the attached table of data I compiled from the Ontario Government data catalogue, all schools over 2,000 pupils in this province are located in high population density areas. I ask, if these feelings of unease were the case for me who visited once, how would a grade 7 student feel who must face this onslaught day after day? This begs the question, who are we creating a school for and what are we preparing them for? And, with the scantiness of benefits that research has now shown to be derived from larger schools, the cost should be seen as one that is too high – on many levels. It should certainly give any school authority pause to think twice before implementing such measures.