

# Small is Beautiful

*Small focused high schools are better for students' healthy development.*

By Paul T. Hill

High schools are risky environments for children, especially boys. Teenagers desperately need to learn the academic and practical skills nominally taught there and, jokes about hormones notwithstanding, their capacity for learning is high.

But many who enter high school do not emerge without suffering serious harm of one kind or another. The most common mishaps are academic failure and premature parenthood. A smaller but still high number leave high school with other scars, including brushes with the law, substance abuse, and mental health problems.

Difficulties are inevitable during the short transition from childhood to adulthood, but there is reason to think that the institution of high school makes its own negative contribution.

Under the best of circumstances, large comprehensive high schools can be confusing places where students can easily get lost. 'Bullet-proof' students — children with unusual internal drives to learn or highly-effective parents or other mentors — can find their way in such schools.

But economically-disadvantaged students whose parents do not know how to work the system typically end up in the least demanding courses. This is not due to malevolence but rather to inattention on the part of school leadership.

Despite the claims that public schools take care of everybody, there is real internal competition for the best opportunities and resources, and students who are the least effective customers get the worst experiences.

Big comprehensive high schools are tough environments for all students. They have been characterized as 'shopping malls,' which offer a vast assortment of options but take a buyer-beware attitude. Savvy consumers can get good bargains, but naïve or inattentive consumers can leave with bags full of things they do not need and cannot use.

## **What Would Work Better?**

Schooling for teenagers is bound to be difficult. Nevertheless, there are several kinds of schools that have succeeded in motivating young people from both advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Parochial High Schools**

One of the most consistent findings from education research is that parochial high schools reduce the correlation between students' socio-economic status and academic achievement. This is done by raising the average for low-income and minority students, not lowering the outcomes for more advantaged students.

Parochial schools are usually academically-focused and relatively small. They have simple curricula — all students take the same core courses with only a few electives, and students with weaker preparation are constantly exposed to the performance levels of the strongest students.

### **Career Magnet Schools**

In the last dozen years, several localities have created new high schools designed to integrate preparation for careers with demanding academic instruction. These schools are built from scratch to prepare students for career-ladder positions in significant local industries — including, for example, financial services near Wall Street, maritime industries in Miami, and civil service in Washington, DC.

Problems common in urban comprehensive high schools, such as student disinterest, poor attendance, violence, and drug use, are rare. The reason, as in the parochial schools, is not harsh discipline, but effective student motivation. These schools link students to adult roles.

Though many graduates take jobs in the industries for which they were trained, the majority, having developed advanced communications and mathematics skills, end up in four-year colleges.

## **New Small Public High Schools**

Chicago, New York City, and some smaller cities are closing dysfunctional big high schools and replacing them with many small schools. Buildings that once housed comprehensive schools for thousands of students are turned into 'multiplexes' that house many small schools, each serving 200-400 students.

Each new school has a well-defined approach to instruction — examples include study of the classics, hands-on science, learning through social research projects, and internships in high-technology companies.

Though these schools are too new to have extensive records of college success, outcomes for all students, including the disadvantaged, are extremely positive. Rates of risky behaviour are very low, and placement in colleges and career ladder jobs very high.

Why do these kinds of schools have such superior outcomes, especially for the groups of poor and minority children who most often fail in big-city comprehensive schools? The answers are consistent across many studies.

- A specific vision
- A well-defined approach to instruction
- A commitment to personalization
- Links to external validators
- Self-direction
- Family and teacher choice

Schools with these characteristics add weight to a growing movement toward high schools that serve as bridges, not barriers, to children's futures.

*(Adapted with permission from "High Schools and the Development of Healthy Young People," [www.aspeninst.org](http://www.aspeninst.org). Dr. Hill is Director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education.)*