

Comprehensive Problems

Large high schools are favoured by school board staff, but they are very problematic.

By Thomas Toch

Today, it is common to find comprehensive high schools with more than 1,000 students and a wide range of subject offerings. School board administrators claim that one huge school is less costly than several small schools. They also state that large schools are better because they make it possible to offer students more options.

However, there are fundamental flaws in the comprehensive high schools that make it impossible for them to achieve today's unprecedented goal of delivering a rigorous academic education to a majority of students.

Because they try to teach so many different subjects to students whom they believe to have sharply-differing educational priorities, comprehensive high schools are highly-fragmented institutions. Rarely do students, parents, teachers, and administrators share a sense of what their schools' priorities should be. There is an absence of "focus" in the schools' curricula and culture.

Rarely, as a result, are comprehensive high schools able to concentrate their energies and their resources in ways that are likely to produce the strongest results. On the contrary, comprehensive high schools tend to be intensely impersonal places, where strong, sustained relationships among teachers and between students and teachers are rare.

The result, in many comprehensive high schools, is a high level of alienation and apathy among students and teachers. The anonymity that pervades many public high schools saps students' motivation to learn and teachers' motivation to teach.

The large size of many comprehensive high schools — enrolments of 2,000 students aren't uncommon — means that roles and relationships are defined largely by rules and regulations. That erodes teachers' stake in their school's success.

Successful High Schools

High schools are more likely to be successful when they are small and personalized — when they have no more than 400 students and stress long-term relationships between students and teachers, individualized attention, extra help for struggling students, and an adult advocate for every student.

Smaller schools generate a level of genuine caring and mutual obligation between students and teachers. As a result, they tend to work harder on each other's behalf.

Student and teacher attendance and student involvement in extra-curricular activities are higher in smaller high schools. Teacher turnover and disciplinary problems are lower. So are drop-out rates. And a wide range of studies reveal that average student achievement is as high as and often higher than that in large schools.

The best schools have a clear sense of what they hope to achieve with their students. They are "focused". Their curricula, their teaching strategies, the way they organize their school day, even in many instances the design of their buildings, are aligned with their educational aims.

Every productive school has a core set of educational beliefs that shapes what its educators do and how they do it.

The social climate in high-achieving high schools stresses respect and responsibility. Students and teachers study and work in the schools by choice. And the schools supply teachers with the time and resources they need to collaborate as professionals.

Small schools promote adult learning as well as student learning. And they signal to teachers and principals that they're far more than mere cogs in a bureaucratic wheel by giving them authority over budgets, curriculum, and staffing.

Students typically work much harder in the classroom when they sense their teachers and other adults in their schools value them. But in large schools teachers struggle merely to learn their students' names.

And the physical atmosphere in many sprawling comprehensive high schools is less than welcoming. Many are drab, cinderblock fortresses, with pass systems and teachers continuously patrolling hallways and grounds.

Nor have sprawling high schools proved to be as cost-efficient as projected. Small high schools (those with fewer than 400 students) spend on average only about 5% more per student than large schools (those with more than 2,000 students), while the small schools actually spend slightly less than large schools per graduate because the large schools have a higher percentage of students who don't earn diplomas.

In the final analysis, big high schools don't even deliver very well on the basic promise of a richer curriculum. Rather than provide higher-level courses in foreign languages, math, and other core subjects, many large high schools squander their additional resources on introductory courses in peripheral subjects such as auto mechanics and business.

For a majority of students, particularly those from disadvantaged families, a large, comprehensive high school is an educational dead end, where low expectations and streaming swell enrollments in courses like Family Living instead of geometry, algebra, and trigonometry.

The basic problem is that comprehensive high schools were created to do something quite different from what we need schools to do today.

(Adapted with permission from High Schools on a Human Scale: How Small Schools Can Transform American Education. Copyright 2003 by Thomas Toch)