

The Importance of Ethos

When it comes to schools, bigger is definitely not better.

By Peter Coleman

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An effective school is likely to be a good place for many different kinds of students, with different kinds of needs and interests. It is also likely to have a positive impact upon both student learning, measured by test scores, and on student attitudes towards both learning and school.

The reverse is also true; bad schools suffer from many problems and difficulties. For example, we know from interviews with students who dropped out of high school that they often had a history of low achievement dating back to their earliest school years. They had poor relationships with teachers and with peers and low participation in school activities. They recall that their parents were not on good terms with their schools. We also know that different schools have different dropout rates; this is important information about school quality.

Effective schools have consistent effects upon various aspects of students' lives and activities. Most of the time, a school that enjoys a good reputation among students, and to which students happily go off each morning, is also a school that is serving them well academically.

The social characteristics — or ethos — of schools are all important to quality. School ethos is a product of leadership and followership — the interactions among the school leader and the people who work there. Good schools are “communities.”

Administrators often see schools as bureaucracies, with rules, hierarchical ranks, fixed roles and responsibilities and a strong legal framework. In some respects, they must. Union contracts, laws and regulations regarding issues such as child abuse or school bus operation, budgets and school district policies — these aspects of bureaucracy do affect schools.

But schools are also communities. To emphasize the importance of ethos is to emphasize the importance of this view of schools. In such communities, relationships among individuals are vitally important — that is the most immediate evidence about the ethos of a school.

As a scholar collecting information about school district quality, I once visited a large high school in the interior of British Columbia. I parked in the school lot (no space reserved for visitors, I noted). My first impression was gained as I approached the main entrance from the lot — a group of students were standing around the entry smoking (and throwing their cigarette butts on the ground around the doorway). As I approached, they stopped talking, but none of them spoke to me or even looked at me. Their expressions were wary and they seemed defensive — perhaps because of the smoking.

I walked into the school. There were students in the hallways, and some teachers (it was shortly after lunch). No one spoke to me, or showed the slightest interest in who I was or why I was there. Eventually, I found the school office (no signs). There was a queue of students waiting to talk to the two secretaries, who were discussing some paperwork. After some time, one of them looked up. She ignored the queue of students, and asked if she could help me.

I asked to see the principal, saying that I had a 1:30 appointment. She turned to the other secretary, and said “Where is he, do you know?” The second one shrugged and said, “No idea.” I waited for some time and eventually he came in. He told me that he went home for lunch every day, as he lived nearby.

That school was the only secondary school in the district, a district that we eventually labelled “Halfheart,” the worst district we studied.

In the last four decades, larger has been seen as better by educators. This is because there are economies of scale to be gained by operating large high schools and because of a desire for program specialization. In order to offer students many electives in the senior grades (a dubious benefit in itself), schools had to be quite large.

Large schools offering program diversity allow more tracking or streaming of students. In such schools, some students experience classrooms with very low academic content and expectations — the basket-weaving options of legend. But small (and often private) high schools tend not to offer lots of options during the school day.

Teachers in big schools tend not to know each other or their students very well. The enlargement of schools reduces the sense of community. This is almost always accompanied by the loss of quality. A good big school is a contradiction in terms. Any school in which the teachers *cannot* know each other well is too big. Any school in which a conscientious principal cannot put a name to nearly every student face is too big.

Upper limits are hard to define, but in practice secondary schools larger than about 600 students, and elementary schools larger than about 400, are unlikely to be effective. I would not send a child to such institutions. Others agree.

“Schools should be neither too large to inhibit a strong sense of community nor too small to offer a full curriculum and adequate instructional facilities. In comparison to the current state of affairs in large city schools, smaller seems better. Our interpretation of the evidence is consistent with that of Goodlad who suggested that the ideal high school enrolls among 500 and 600 students.” (Lee, Bryk and Smith)

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