

Small Can Be Beautiful

Small schools are generally better in many ways, while costing no more than large schools.

By Frank Gue

In 1973, economist E.F. Schumacher wrote *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. Modern business and industry thinkers understand the virtues of smallness, but in education we still assume that newer and bigger must be better. Many people also believe that more money will automatically yield better academic results.

These misconceptions are contradicted locally and internationally. For example, in 27 schools in Halton West, Taxpayers Coalition Halton Inc. found the following.

- On the basis of public board figures, there was **no** significant difference in cost per pupil in schools ranging from 100 to 900 students.
- When the percentage of Level 3 and 4 (at standard or better on provincial tests) were charted against enrolment, it was clear that “small” schools (averaging 281 students) produced 28% Level 3 and 4, while “large” (average 694 students) produced only 9% Level 3 and 4, even though the schools had similar demographics. (See chart.)
- A comparison of results per cost dollar for the lowest-scoring, highest-scoring, and all schools show that the highest-scoring schools have the lowest cost. Clearly, taxpayers are not necessarily “getting what they pay for.”

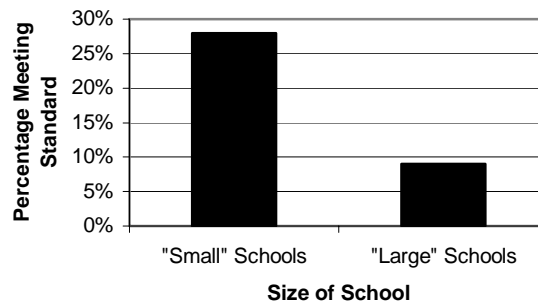
Research by the U.S. National School Boards Association shows the same thing on a much larger scale.

It is well known in industry that usually a small enterprise outperforms a large one on every measure — quality, cost, customer service, morale, etc. The same phenomenon occurs in schools, namely that small schools frequently outperform large schools in

terms of measures such as academic achievement, cost per student, dropout rates, vandalism, and bullying.

The main argument used to justify large schools is that they can be better supplied with resources such as consultants, guidance councillors, librarians, and computers. But these resources are not necessarily beneficial. For example, there is growing evidence that computers don't help, and can hinder, education.

**Percentage of Successful Students
27 Halton West Schools**



The real and hidden costs of busing to big schools often goes unrecognized. Millions of dollars of grossly-underused vehicles contribute to gridlock and pollution. Uncounted hours of study and recreation time are wasted travelling to and from school. Instead of walking to a nearby school, thus getting valuable exercise, children become accustomed to always being transported.

Another hidden cost of large schools is sociological, involving such things as community spirit, teacher-parent closeness and cooperation, and student-staff first-name friendliness. The research shows that small schools build these relationships better: parents take more part in school affairs, and there is more extra-curricular activity, less alienation and fewer dropouts.

When factors such as busing and communities are considered, smaller schools start to look even better. For a fuller discussion of their advantages, refer to the website www.kwfdn.org, and look for “Dollars and Sense: The Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools.”

Almost ignored in the rush to close small schools are the views of parents. Public Agenda, a public-policy think tank surveyed thousands of parents about conditions at their schools, including such things as teacher helpfulness, high standards, and bullying. (www.publicagenda.org, click on “Sizing Things Up” on the drop-down menu at Special Reports)

Public Agenda found that parents whose children were in small schools were generally happier on every measure. For example, 36% more small-school parents reported “good writing” on the part of students, and less alienation and bullying.

Peter Coleman, Professor of Educational Administration at Simon Fraser University, writes:

“A good big school is a contradiction in terms....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.”

Bigger and newer is not necessarily better, and in fact can be worse. Furthermore, increasing expenditure does not assure improved results; that is, input does not equal output. We should be appraising results — what the system produces, not what it consumes.

(Mr. Gue is a retired engineer. He is the founder of Taxpayers Coalition Halton, Inc., and served as its education chair. In addition, he is an OQE director.)