

CONSOLIDATION

Commentary and Research

IS CONSOLIDATION OF SMALL SCHOOLS PROGRESS?

Although Mt. Horeb School did not close its doors until September, 1948 (and the last Harford County, Maryland, small rural school, Jefferson, near Carsin's Run, in 1954), consolidation of elementary schools slowly began in 1907—at the request of parents.⁶⁶ Regional schools for African-Americans began in 1951 and 1954.

People who are slow to accept change are often told they are “standing in the way of progress.” But the challenge is in *defining* the phrase. To set the stage for this discussion a story about the Movers and Shakers of education may be insightful.

Class Size “Doesn't Matter”

In recent decades public school teachers across the nation were told that class size had no measurable effect on students' (let alone, teachers') performance; that 33 students per class could do as well as 21 or 18. Teachers with large classes shook their heads in disbelief, but what could they do? Because of teacher rumblings, perhaps, more research was done, and often new findings verified former conclusions. So, teachers plodded along while many administrators urged them to stop complaining about class size and knuckle down to improving student performance.

Later, new research found that the former research was either flawed or the data incorrectly interpreted; that class size *did* matter. This gave beleaguered teachers hope for smaller classes—which, unfortunately, did not come to poor school districts.

Nevertheless, the moral of this story is 1) that school boards, educational leaders, researchers and pedagogical movements—no matter how fervent their cause—can be wrong, and 2) that numbers do matter when educating children—other things being equal.

The Consolidators' Arguments

Except when one- or two-room, small-community schoolhouses were the thing to build, such schools have purposely suffered from neglect through the decades. By the 1940s and earlier, consolidation was the educational buzzword and like a fever it swept the country. But was it justified; was it defensible? At least two main reasons were given by its adherents that only time—30 to 40 years—would prove less than persuasive.

One argument was that it was more economical to combine several rural elementary or high schools into larger plants. But this “appears to have no empirical or logical basis. It is simply incorrect to assert that consolidation is synonymous with economy.”⁶⁷

One example: Rural students who walked to their small-community school for free now required a tax-payer-supported bus system reflecting the costs of purchase and depreciation, maintenance, gas, drivers’ salaries, more administrators, health and retirement benefits, collision and personal injury insurance, and concomitant inflation.

“Consolidators have been so enamored with suburban facilities and programs that they have tried to simply eliminate the small country school rather than attempting to build it into a unique and effective educational model.”⁶⁸ How have they done this? By offering building incentives—even today—for consolidation, thus the rural schools and small school districts have survived at a subsistence level because *they* don’t get grants for rebuilding or remodeling on a smaller scale. And who is to blame for this inequity? The lobbying professional administrators and professors.⁶⁹

When the economic argument proved less than sound over the years, the tack was to switch to another justification. Rural regional/larger schools, it was argued, could offer a much broader educational program, more services (guidance counselors, for example) and better-educated teachers—since the latter supposedly gravitate to such larger schools. Yet, in the end, it is the final student product that counts.

In 1995 there were only 428 one-room schools left in America and consolidation may erase many of them “despite the fact that year after year pupils in small rural schools in the Midwest and West score the highest on Scholastic Aptitude Tests because school size is a key to student performance.”⁷⁰

When accounting for socioeconomic factors like parents’ income and education, rural schools tend to test lower or equal to *wealthier* urban or suburban schools. And if they were afforded the modern facilities (equipment, amenities and services lauded as so helpful) of the consolidated schools, results would no doubt be even better. The key factor remains size.⁷¹

Consolidation diminishes both parent and student involvement, parent and student school-related intimacy, and identification with or pride in the school.⁷² “Considerable research in small group dynamics supports the contention that small groups function more smoothly than large ones.”⁷³

“Reinventing” the Small School

Within the last ten-plus years, smallness—or an attempt at it—has been coming back into vogue. Some large schools have instituted, with less than satisfactory success, schools or chapters “within a school;” a physically separated area within which students and teachers can feel more intimate and less like a number and where student participation will be more frequent.

A similar twist, currently sweeping schools, is the “small learning community” with its own within-building “local control” of courses of study, types of materials, and other cooperative involvement. The success of this effort is still doubtful.

Even the Charter School Movement is partly fed by a desire for smallness; separation from the monolithic, impersonal school factory—although the movement’s main gripes are with the public school’s curriculum and behavior standards.

And what is one of the first questions parents ask of an exclusive private school where they are going to spend hard-earned money? “What is the student-teacher ratio?” They want smallness, too. Fortunately, some current educators—lone voices in the wilderness—are calling for the building of smaller schools.

In the last decades, city dwellers have been flocking back to towns and rural areas, making the small school setting feasible again. The automobile and TV have lessened the once-felt rural cultural isolation. And the computer and other electronic marvels can make educational decentralization a reality.

Consolidation Still the Buzzword

In an article in *USA Today*, June 2, 1999, entitled “Rural Schools Left Wanting,” the authors wrote, “A quarter of the nation’s public school students who live in rural areas and small towns, more than 12 million, increasingly are denied the technological, educational, and social advantages of attending school in a modern building.” That statement is a purely euphemistic way of proposing that consolidation is the answer.

Such students suffer, the writers contended, because many of the regions are poor and of low population density; that they can’t afford to keep up with more affluent or consolidated areas—or they refuse to at such a high cost. Many of these communities are suing the state for monies to build schools for their districts or counties using the argument of equity. If successful, more likely, and unfortunately, many will have to adopt the larger-is-better philosophy of their more affluent neighbors (maybe only 30 miles away) simply because the money will come with strings attached.

Of course, local control must be tempered with social equity, too (it was not always in the past), but smallness has its vitality, lack of bureaucracy, and community orientation and control that large impersonal schools lack by the sheer force of numbers and distance. The state has nothing to fear by decentralizing schools; it has always extensively regulated education.⁷⁴

The teacher colleges (which have woefully neglected rural education for decades) will have to specially train teachers for a rural or small-school career—whether the school has one or five teachers. State funding will have to change from a consolidate-or-suffer attitude and establish an equity formula that does not penalize such schools. Likewise, when current schools become too old to maintain or too small, the student body should be divided into small community-based schools. Finally, consolidation advocates—governmental and educational bureaucrats (still pushing their wares)—will have to face the inadequacies of large schools, whether urban, suburban or rural.

THE LATEST RESEARCH

Careful readers may be concerned that I have relied on some 21- to 27-year-old books to support an anti-consolidation stance. One point in favor of the books is that

their conclusions were based on almost 40 years of consolidation experience. If that is not enough time to establish a pattern, little is.

Current trade books do not provide a more thorough treatment of the subject, but recent research does. The ERIC (Educational Research Information Clearinghouse) Data Base, "Rural Education and Small Schools," houses "digests" of the most *recent* and most *pertinent* research on the subject of consolidation, which confirms older research with equal clarity and forcefulness. I will let the interested reader peruse the full length of the digests' texts or search out the original research, but the following supportive—all were supportive—summaries are significant. For brevity's sake, I will list them. Please note that the ERIC Data Base is accessible via the Internet on home or public library computers, but the resource has changed since 2003. Now you have three sources to consult for the following research and for continually updated research. The Web sites are as follows: <eric.ed.gov>, <ericdigest.org>, and <search.eric.org>. Also of interest is <smallschoolsworkshop.org>.

1. ED 372 897/1994/THE ACADEMIC EFFECTIVENESS OF SMALL-SCALE SCHOOLING (AN UPDATE)/CRAIG HOWLEY

Summary: There is a strong positive effect of small school size on attitudes and satisfaction, participation, attachment to school, low dropout rate and attendance. And there is no significant difference in performance of students in small rural and larger high schools. The idea that smaller schools cannot provide a curriculum with adequate breadth and depth is an exaggeration. Schools with less than 400 with a "much more narrowly focused academic curriculum can produce high levels of achievement."

2. ED 384 479/1995/THE ROLE OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT/BRUCE A. MILLER

Summary: Rural schools provide basic education, "serve as a cultural center, and...play a vital part in community life and identity formation. The revitalization and survival of [small] communities lies in creating and sustaining collaborative partnerships with...schools."

3. ED 384 484/1995/RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION AND STUDENT LEARNING/JIM FANNING

Summary: There is evidence that school consolidation may worsen the social order via "impersonal climate, increased bureaucracy, low student participation" and social conflicts. "Consolidation offers little or no financial advantage in controlling costs."

4. ED 401 089/1996/ONGOING DILEMMAS OF SCHOOL SIZE: A SHORT STORY/CRAIG HOWLEY

Summary: "Even if there are only "twenty or thirty children and an efficient teacher, we have the essential factors of a good school." Nevertheless, "state agencies continue to close small schools and create large ones for the sake of *alleged* [emphasis added] cost-efficiency and curriculum breadth. Policymakers need to find ways to sustain and improve small schools." Finally, "the *effectiveness* [emphasis added] of small size through such mechanisms as 'schools-within-schools,' despite substantial popularity, is very limited."

5. ED 401 088/1996/AFFECTIVE AND SOCIAL BENEFITS OF SMALL-SCALE SCHOOLING/KATHLEEN COTTON

Summary: "Research on the...social effects of school size is extensive and highly consistent. ... The smallness of schools, regardless of setting [rural or urban], ... is beneficial to students."

6. ED 425 049/1999/ CURRENT LITERATURE ON SMALL SCHOOLS/MARY ANNE RAYWID

Summary: Small schools [are] more productive and effective than large ones: students make more rapid progress, fewer of them drop out, and they behave better.

7. ED 448 968/2000/RESEARCH ABOUT SCHOOL SIZE AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE IN IMPOVERISHED COMMUNITIES/CRAG HOWLEY, MARTY STRANGE, ROBERT BICKEL

Summary: A preponderance of evidence favored smaller size nearly universally.