ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

EPSL | EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES LABORATORY
Education Policy Research Unit

SCHOOL REFORM PROPOSALS: THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

SMALL SCHOOLS

BY CRAIG HOWLEY
ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON RURAL EDUCATION AND SMALL SCHOOLS, AEL

Research Quality

Despite widespread interest in small schools, the research literature is thin. The best empirical work is found research by Herbert Walberg and colleagues; by Valerie Lee and colleagues; and by Craig Howley and colleagues. Evidence on the effectiveness of Schools-Within-A-School – a strategy to reduce school size within existing large school buildings – is negligible.

Research Findings

Defining Small Schools: School size norms vary tremendously. Total enrollments of 400 or fewer students in high school and 200 or fewer in K-8 or K-6 elementary schools can be considered small. Enrollment per grade measures school size more accurately than total enrollment.

Upper Limits of Size: Opinions about the upper limits of school size range widely, from 300 to 1,000, relying on varying sources of authority from research to practice. Legislation and other government policy has also addressed the issue; for instance, Florida law now limits new schools to 900 students for high schools, 700 for middle schools, 500 for elementary schools.

The Walberg Team: The influence of district size is several times as great as school size. School and district size have been rigorously and consistently identified as negative influences on achievement. Smaller schools and districts might also be socially advantageous regardless of socioeconomic status, and equity and excellence might reinforce one another.

The Lee Team: Students in schools of 601-1200 students showed higher achievement gains than those in schools of 1,201-1,500 students. Students in high schools of fewer than 300 performed worse. Disadvantaged students suffered disproportionate achievement costs in very large or very small schools; enrollments of 601-900 offered the best equity and excellence compromise.

The Howley Team: Larger sizes are academically beneficial in affluent communities, but they are harmful in impoverished communities. Smaller schools and districts showed greater *achievement equity* – that is, less association between achievement and socioeconomic status.

Research Consensus: Smaller school size is associated with higher achievement under some conditions; smaller schools promote substantially improved achievement equity; and smaller schools may be especially important for disadvantaged students.

Remaining Research Questions

Are there benefits to popular but unresearched simulations of smaller size such as pods, academies, and schools-within-schools? Do minimum and maximum size thresholds exist? Why is smaller school size associated with higher and more equitable levels of achievement for individuals, schools, and districts? What are the implications of state-level size variation for education policy?

Recommendations

Policy makers should:

- Find ways to sustain existing small schools, especially in impoverished rural and urban communities.
- Acknowledge an upper limit for school size, and acknowledge that many schools should be much smaller than the upper limit.
- Not design, build, or sustain mega-schools serving 500 to 2,000 students, depending on educational level and grade-span configuration.
- Design, build, and sustain much smaller schools in impoverished districts or districts with a mixed social-class composition. In very poor communities, design, build, and sustain the smallest schools.
- Not oversell smaller schools. Operating smaller schools in impoverished communities is good policy, but it is not a "magic bullet."
- Not believe that mega-schools serving affluent areas are necessarily excellent or even very good. Most accountability schemes obscure this fact because they do not generally take socioeconomic status into account.
- Recognize that smaller schools in impoverished settings can make great accomplishments even when test their students' scores are about average.

The foregoing is a summary of a chapter in the book *School Reform Proposals: The Research Evidence* (Information Age Publishing, 2002), edited by Alex Molnar. The full chapter can be viewed at:
http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EPRU 2002-101/Chapter 03-Howley-Final.pdf