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[Home](#) » [School Issues](#) » [Ed News Headlines](#) » [Are Smaller Schools Better](#)

January 24, 2017 [Teacher Essentials](#)

[Administrators](#)

[Lesson Plans](#)

[Technology](#)

[PD Tips](#)

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Are Smaller Schools Better Schools?

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Reforming public education may be as simple as creating smaller schools.

The results of two recent

studies indicate that small schools may be the remedy for lots of what is wrong with public education. Small schools can reduce the negative effects of poverty, reduce violence, and increase parent involvement and student accountability.



Creating a better school may be as simple as creating a smaller one. The results of two recent studies indicate that small schools may be the remedy for lots of things that are wrong with public education, especially for the nation's poor children. The separate studies credit small schools with reducing the negative effects of poverty on student achievement, reducing student violence, increasing parent involvement, and making students feel accountable for their behavior and grades.

Educators have long known that poverty hurts student achievement. Researchers Craig Howley, of Ohio University and the Appalachia Educational Laboratory, and Robert Bickel, of Marshall University, set out to find out whether smaller schools could reduce the negative effects of poverty on student achievement. In four separate studies of seven states, they repeatedly found that poor kids do better if they attend a small school. In fact, in the most recent four-state study, the correlation between poverty and low achievement was ten times stronger in larger schools than in smaller ones in all four states. Howley and Bickel found that the benefit of smaller schools was particularly important in the middle grades, when children are most at risk of dropping out.

The researchers initially evaluated schools in California. Howley then replicated the research in schools in West Virginia and Alaska.

More recently, the Rural School and Community Trust, a national nonprofit organization, asked Bickel and Howley to study [School Size, Poverty, and Student Achievement in Montana, Ohio, Georgia, and Texas](#). The study included 13,600 urban, suburban, and rural schools in 2,290 school districts.

They found that at least one-fourth of the schools serving moderate- to low-income communities in Texas, one-third in Georgia, and two-fifths in

Ohio are too large for students to achieve top performance. In Montana, among kids in grade 8 in larger districts, the power of poverty over achievement was 2.5 times greater than in smaller districts overall and three times greater in elementary-only districts.

SIZE MATTERS

"Everyone knows that there is a strong association between social class and achievement and that this association works very much to the disadvantage of economically disadvantaged students," Bickel told Education World. "The California research, however, had the virtue of demonstrating that this disadvantage was exaggerated as school size increased."

Each time Bickel and Howley conducted another study, the results were very similar. "It's very unusual in education research to find this degree of consistency," Bickel said.

Howley and Bickel did not base their findings on a definition of what constitutes a large or small school but looked at school size on a continuum. They found that poor students from relatively smaller schools outperform poor students from larger schools.

TEST SCORES DROP IN LARGE SCHOOLS

In Georgia, achievement scores in schools serving children from poorer communities fell on 27 of 29 test scores as the school size increased. In Texas, scores dropped on eight of ten tests. In Ohio, at all grade levels, students in both smaller schools and smaller school districts that served poorer communities had a higher achievement rate.

The researchers also found all students benefited from attending small schools, regardless of the levels of community poverty. That was especially true in Montana. In fact, groups of less-affluent students out-performed groups of more-affluent students on standardized tests in the eighth grade if they attended a smaller school

SMALL SCHOOLS MAKE 'CENTS'

"A common argument for making schools larger is expressed in terms of economics of scale: Large schools save money," Bickel said. "Recently, however, using the Texas data set, we have found that 116 districts that have only one school for all grades have an expenditure per pupil that averages about \$389 lower than the more conventionally modern schools. These schools tend to be small, they have at least 13 grade levels from kindergarten to grade 12, and the students are distributed more or less evenly across grade levels.

A new study, Small Schools: Great Strides, reveals some significant potential benefits of small schools.

- Dropout rates are significantly lower.
- Students have higher grade-point averages.
- Students have better attendance records.
- Fewer students fail courses.
- Students demonstrate persistence toward graduation
- Fewer students are retained at the elementary level.
- Students achieve higher standardized test scores in reading.

"Hardly sounds like a modern consolidated school," Bickel continued. "So perhaps cost in dollar terms is not a barrier to making schools more equitable places."

'TEACHER SATISFACTION WENT WAY UP!'

Another study also linked student achievement with small schools. The

two-year study, [Small Schools: Great Strides](#), was conducted by Bank Street College of Education and funded by the Joyce Foundation.

A team of seven researchers took a close look at 150 small schools in Chicago, many created as part of education reform that started in the city during the past decade. The schools had enrollments between 200 to 400 students, far below the national average of 741, said Pat Wasley, one of the principal co-investigators of the study.

The researchers found that student achievement was greater in the small schools than in the larger schools. Students, parents, teachers, and community volunteers reported greater satisfaction because they felt more connected to one another, Wasley told Education World.

"Teacher satisfaction went way up!" Wasley added. "[Teachers] thought teaching was more fun, satisfying, and that they were more effective teachers, that they could get the kids moving in a positive direction." Many teachers told the researchers that teaching at a small school reminded them why they became teachers in the first place.

GREATER EXPECTATIONS

The report found that teachers expected more from their students because they knew them better and cared about what happened to them; students acknowledged this to researchers.

Teachers reported more collaboration with colleagues and more-regular professional development activities at their schools. They also had greater contact with parents and understood them as an important element in student success. Lack of parental involvement in schools is often a problem in poor communities.

Like the Howley and Bickel studies linking small schools to reducing the impact of poverty on student achievement, the Chicago study also found the connection. "Some of our schools in the study were among the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Chicago," Wasley said. However, the study found that those students still outperformed their peers in large schools in many areas.

"We actually do think that urban school districts should create smaller schools because it's doing so much for the students," Wasley explained. "If we had our druthers, we really would want to see large schools the exception, not the rule."

WHERE EVERYONE KNOWS YOUR NAME

Although a variety of factors affect student achievement, the greatest factor was the reduction of anonymity -- going to a school where someone knows you and your name. Being known by your teachers and peers makes a difference, Wasley noted.

The study found that small schools are also safer for this reason. "We really think that size does have to do with the reduction of anonymity and isolation of students, which reduces fighting and violence," Wasley explained.

Students took more responsibility for their behavior and the behavior of their classmates in small schools. They told researchers they fought less because they knew one another.

SMALL SCHOOLS NOT ENOUGH

The researchers warn other school districts that simply creating small schools isn't enough. They advise the following key considerations for districts that want to create small schools.

- Small schools need support from within and outside the system to flourish. All the schools in the Chicago study had outside partners that supported the school. The central administration also needs to support the creation of small schools.
- Small schools succeed only when teachers and administrators have enough time to plan the vision and mission of the school. They must act as a unified team to build the school's structure, rules, and consequences for parents and students.
- School systems must supply ongoing staff development to help teachers identify and use best practices. Schools do better if they rely on data rather than educational trends.
- Being small isn't enough to improve student achievement. Small schools are a key ingredient, not a panacea for improvement. Understand that small schools are fragile and need commitment from staff members to hang in there when times get tough.

SCHOOLS WITHIN SCHOOLS

One way of creating smaller schools is redesigning large schools to house schools within schools, Wasley said. "I think we are going to have to have some of these great big buildings refitted for a bunch of small schools."

Wasley has support from the nation's top educator. Last fall, Richard W. Riley told the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on the Budget: "And both new and renovated schools should be designed for the kind of education we know works best: smaller schools that create a sense of community and small classrooms in which teachers can provide lots of individual attention."

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