Issue Paper: Effectiveness of Small School Environments
Jocelyn Castro
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It is not uncommon for schools across the country to be stretched of its resources due to overcrowding. As our student population is increasing in our high schools, quality of education is decreasing dramatically as time progresses. This creates an environment that is not beneficial to any of the stakeholders involved with education. Overcrowding creates a situation where schools are breaking at the seams and creating large student populations. Students deal on an everyday basis moving along in the traffic found in our hallways, gymnasiums, cafeterias, and classrooms. Many problems arise from the result of having a large school including, but not limited to, hostile environment, anonymity, and substandard education. Owen, Cooper, and Brown (2002) present a disconnect between students and services. There are too many students for schools to fully support with their developmental needs. The lack of services leads to high dropout rates. According to Ark (2002), one out of every twenty high school student’s dropout, and in urban poor rural school districts, dropout rate exceeds fifty percent.

Large schools have built a culture where anonymity and achievement gaps are common (Ark, 2000). The articles emphasized that large schools allow students to fall into the cracks. Without a unified administration and faculty, students have an easier time getting by without being noticed. Students are able to get by high school without learning anything needed to be successful in their adult life. The education system has failed many students; especially minorities who graduate from high school with skills at the middle school level (Ark, 2002). Due to low adolescent literacy, many students do not graduate from high school. Even with these alarming statistics, federal funding is nowhere to be found to assist our high school students. This allows the achievement gap to widen (Frost, 2003). “Larger schools,” Muir (2001) states in his article, “are disproportionately harmful to students from poor and minority backgrounds” (p. 42).
What is the next step to change the system to improve the quality of education for our students? Researchers point to small schools and smaller learning communities as solutions. One of the problems researchers face is the definition of “small”. Ark (2002) defines small as not having more than 100 students per grade level. Ilg and Manuel looked at small schools with fewer than 600 students (2003). Muir (2001) presented the definition of small by giving a range of different kinds of small schools rather than a particular type. This inconsistency needs to be corrected so that studies can provide a better correlation of school size and effectiveness. A stronger definition of the optimal school size can give districts a better understanding on how to improve their situations. Although this stronger definition of small is not absolute, districts are able to modify it to improve their own situations.

Studies provide ample positive anecdotal evidence to show the effectiveness of small school environments. Not many articles stated empirical data showing how these observations and results were discovered. Regardless of the lack of numerical data, the anecdotal evidence cannot be ignored. Many articles point out the positive effects in the administrative level, the teacher level, and most importantly in the student level.

Copland and Boatright (2004) focus on the advantages of leadership roles in a small school environment. Smaller faculties are able to focus their attention on a particular issue. Productive discussions can occur in smaller groups that lead to effective solutions. A collaborative effort towards the same goal takes us closer to improving the quality of education. This consistency is observed by the students, and positively affects their outlook on the faculty. Smaller schools erase anonymity between administrators, teachers and students. Students have personal, unique, and positive interactions with the administrators. Large schools allow teachers to become isolated in their classrooms and departments. Collaboration and discussions improve
in smaller schools because there is concrete support among colleagues. Small schools allow for a more collaborative and nurturing community that builds for success not failure. The interactions in a small school are more personal and meaningful in and outside the classroom setting. In large schools most administrative and student interaction are based on disciplinary issues. This change to a positive environment provides a more equitable education. Administrators and teachers can offer real chances to ensure successes for every student regardless of background, ethnicity, or social status. Most importantly, Copland and Boatright (2001) argue the significance of sharing power, rather than having the traditional “top-down leadership.” Shared decision and responsibilities result in a nurturing school culture, where issues can become learning opportunities and solvable problems. Ark’s (2002) study saw the positive effects of collegial professional relationships, “Schools must be so small that governance does not become the topic of discussion but issues of education do” (p. 58).

 Teachers in small schools show an increase in their achievement in all their students. Deutsch (2003) compared several factors that affect the teaching profession on an everyday basis. Personal interaction in a small classroom can occur on a daily basis because a teacher’s time and attention is not stretched due to an overcrowded classroom. This personal interaction does not limit teachers inside the classroom, but they see their students in an extracurricular environment. Teachers are able to spend more time on instruction rather than maintaining classroom management. A variety of instructional strategies is more feasible and more successful in a smaller class. As all these positive factors come into play in the profession, teachers tend to have a better and improved morale with students and administrators. Together, these relationships create a positive learning environment (Deutsch 2003).
Students positively respond to a nurturing and supportive environment. Students in a small class are more engaged with the curriculum (Deutsch 2003). Small schools give students more opportunities to be involved in and out of the classroom. A change in the environment has a positive impact on academic achievement for all students, especially a great improvement with poor and minority children. Student’s socioeconomic status had a lesser impact on their achievement when attending a small school (Ilg & Massucci, 2003). Overall, all students in a small school show an increase in attendance rates, grade point averages, and high student satisfaction with their education (Ark, 2002). Also, dropout rates decreased dramatically in a positive environment provided by a small school.

Academic achievement is not the only positive effects of a small school. Studies show that small schools also show better patterns of student behavior when compared to large schools. Large and overcrowded schools tend to have higher levels of violence. As school size decreased, so did the percentage of disciple problems. Small schools from Chicago record student stating that less fights occurred in their schools because students knew each other and that they felt more inclined to resolving their own conflicts in peaceful manners (Muir, 2001). Due to this kind of smaller communities, students in Rhode Island has seen the transformation of their school environment to have a less invasive security (Ark, 2002). Students create better relationships with their peers because their interactions are not impersonal or based on hearsay. The environment in a small school improves student experiences during their time in high school. The students are more intrinsically motivated to be in school rather than feeling forced or locked down.

Not all believe in the idea of creating small schools and smaller learning communities. Unfortunately, the opposing side’s main argument is the cost effectiveness of the schools. Large
schools show that they are be less expensive to operate. Numbers show that more students are able to use common spaces such as cafeterias, auditoriums, and gymnasiums. This provides a lower number of per-pupil cost due to the large number of students using these facilities. (Muir, 2001). Having facilities being rundown due to overuse leads to costly maintenance and improvement through the years. Budget is already complicated, and looking around in large schools, facilities are not kept well because it is not a priority. However, in the long run, when graduation rates increase and dropout rates decrease, cost per graduate was lower in a small school (Cleary & English 2005). Numbers need to be observed not just in a snapshot look, but in the long term effects of having students graduate from high school.

As a product of a small public school system, the support that adolescents seek for cannot be given in a large school setting. As I compare my teaching experience in a large school and my student experience in a small school, I can see the disconnect that occurs between all the stakeholders. All these connections that need to be made is a good source of the problems that we are facing in our school system. Copland and Boatright (2004) state many possible solutions that a small school can ensure our students’ success. Small schools are more effective because these disconnected, impersonal interactions are not found. Everyone is accountable for his or her action and for each other. The connections, relationships and experience in a small school creates a “unique influence” on students, faculty, and administrators.

Most research and reform take place in the elementary school level, but not so much in the high school. This is explained by the federal funding found in the elementary school level. Research will be beneficial to present to government officials so that action and reform can take place in the high school setting. High schools are short changed, and numbers prove the need for assistance. With the necessary funding, and needed support from all stakeholders in the
community, high schools can graduate students who are ready to positively contribute to our society (Frost, 2003). The studies all have evidence connecting achievement and small schools. The evidence needs to be stronger with a more concrete idea of “small” in the school setting. More research will show the positive correlation of small school and student achievement with higher graduation rates, higher grade point averages, and lower absenteeism. This study can be taken to the next step and show how are these students from small schools producing in our society. This will provide a stronger argument for the effectiveness of a small school. Further research is asked to be also not just restricted to the contribution in schools but to see their lives in post-secondary schools and/or in society (Muir 2001).

There is a lot to be learned from a small school: positive learning environment; increase student involvement; and better morale amongst all stakeholders. These positive outcomes from small schools can be seen as great solutions to our overcrowding schools. Regardless of your role in a school environment, teacher, student, administrator, the same responsibilities are found. Everyone is accountable for himself or herself and for each other to uphold the same goal, educating our youth in a positive environment. Everyone creates unique and personal interaction among the community. Being able to positively contribute to the school culture and making it a safe environment for all leads to successful rates across the board. Small schools have positive momentum that can change a range of problems from discipline to absenteeism to achievement gaps. Large, comprehensive high schools have a lot to learn from our small school counterparts.
Reference


*Leadership, 32*(1), 8-10.