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**HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LARGE
SCHOOLS IN AMERICA**

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The current enthusiasm for small schools needs historical perspective. Small schools today interest many educators and policymakers as a potential solution to what ails American schools. The criticism of large schools as inhumane, inefficient, and unsafe seems so reasonable one wonders how educators could have ever held other views. But they did. Until the 1970s, the small school was seen as the problem, not the answer. Before then, if large schools were questioned, it was only the behemoths—urban high schools over 3,000 students and elementary schools over 1,000—that were worrisome, and they were rare. It was the other end of the spectrum, the very small school, that drew much more concern and criticism than the very large school.

The tiny schools were everywhere. Although their count fell steadily as student enrollments rose, they persisted for a long time in most parts of the country. As late as 1940, there were 114,000 one room schools, mostly elementary. Fewer than 10% of all rural schools in 1940 had either six or more teachers or 200+ students (Reeves, 1945, p. 127; Weiler, 1998, p. 236). The rate of change accelerated thereafter. From 114,000 in 1940 to 60,000 in 1950, with an even steeper rate of decline in the next two decades (20,000 in 1960 and 2,000 by 1970), the one room school almost vanished. The number of school districts also plummeted as “consolidation” picked up speed. When former Harvard President James Conant in 1957 began a series of studies of American education, there were 50,446 school districts, with 58% holding fewer than 50 students (several thousand relics lacked any students). Thirty years later two thirds of those were gone (American Association of School Administrators, 1958, pp. 80-91; Conant, 1959, pp. 84-85).

In comparison with rural America, the size of schools in cities and suburbs seemed less objectionable. Minute urban schools were just about extinct by 1900 and they rarely reappeared. The expansion of scale (especially in the suburbs) was not in massive elementary schools or the handful of huge high schools; those were never very common. The ideal of the neighborhood elementary school capped its size in many communities, and the mammoth high school with a thousand or so students per grade required too much urban space. The expansion of scale took place by redefining a large high school as a typical high school. A big high school

before World War II enrolled from 500 to 2500 students. Only 14% of the country's high schools were that large; 75% held fewer than 200 students, and only 7% had more than 1,000 students. Fifty years later, 53% of American high schools were in the 500 to 2,500 range, with 84% of the students there (Digest, 1990, p. 104; Gaumnitz and Tompkins, 1949).

There was no single argument set forth to justify and celebrate large schools. This essay will look at five beliefs, each firmly held for a long time by most educators. The following points became articles of faith rather than issues to explore, and the advocates of small schools were usually dismissed as ignorant cranky laymen unaware of their own best interests.

DIFFERENCES MATTER MORE THAN SIMILARITIES

Nothing was more troubling about small schools than their “ungraded” organization. Having students of widely different ages and aptitudes in the same room precluded good teaching, most educators believed. How could one teacher provide coherent instruction to students far apart in academic preparation? Clever teachers might devise stopgap measures and improvise admirably but they faced a fundamentally impossible task when there was so much diversity in one room. What the students shared—similar neighborhoods, common relatives, comparable experiences on the farm—mattered less than the differences. Students should be separated by age.

Beyond the first five or six years, they should not only be clustered by age but also be grouped by ability and by interests. Offering at least two, and preferably more, distinctive courses of study has always been valued by American junior and senior high schools. The earliest American high schools typically featured coursework designed for youth headed for business as well as college preparatory fare for others (Reese, 1995). By 1930, roughly half of the high schools offered academic, commercial, general, and vocational “tracks.” Enrollment in each track turned on test scores, course grades, teacher recommendations, parental preferences, and the students' wishes. In schools without formal tracks, ability grouping also classified students by putting youth of similar intelligence and achievement in the same sections of a course. Although few

schools grouped by ability in every subject, most teachers and administrators welcomed the practice. It seemed so logical and natural that they pondered how to do it—refining the measures that identified who was suitable for which section—more than why it was done. The racist and sexist upshot of labeling many minority and female students as academically less capable than white males troubled only a few educators (Chapman, 1988, chs. 5-7; Hampel, 1986, ch. 1).

In the last half century, formal tracking became less fashionable and less pervasive, but ability grouping in various forms took up the slack and found new manifestations. Since the 1950s, the demand for Advanced Placement sections for rigorous work of college caliber prompts most schools to offer separate “AP” sections in many subjects. Since the mid 1970s, grouping by disability increased rapidly with the growth of special education services, including but not limited to separate sections.

There are other ways that many schools differentiate students, both within the schoolday (special programs for truants and troublemakers, for example, and also electives that reflect teachers’ particular interests) and after it (dozens of clubs and teams). But the point is clear without exploring each nook and cranny in the shopping mall high school. Educators perceived significant differences among students, and they responded by offering new courses along with more sections of the old courses (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen, 1985).

Throughout the century, periodic efforts to streamline the curriculum have foundered. “Blocked” or “core” courses that joined or replaced two classes (frequently English and social studies) enrolled fewer than 10% of junior and senior high school students by mid-century, notwithstanding years of advocacy by many professional educators. The number of different courses rose decade after decade, according to a series of thorough federal surveys of high school course enrollments (Angus and Mirel, 1999).

The small school seemed unable to sort and divide students adequately. How could it offer a sufficient array of tracks, ability grouped sections, and other fare to match the many crucial ways in which kids differ? The math seemed simple and undeniable, especially because the mission then, unlike now, rarely included serious academic work for all students. According to an influential

report in 1959 from James Conant, all high schools should enroll at least 400 students. Advanced study in math, science, and foreign language would be impossible unless each grade level had one hundred students or more. Calculus, physics, French IV, and other rigorous courses could only be scheduled if the school had enough students, good students, to sign up (Conant, 1959). Conant never envisioned a comprehensive high school spawning schools within a school, or Houses, popular options in the early 1970s. Nor did he foresee anything like the charter school movement. Little enclaves, either within or outside the public high school, would have disappointed Conant as too small to provide the classes he insisted the talented top 15% needed. He would have been dismayed by Deborah Meier's claim that "smallness makes democracy feasible in schools." (Meier, 1995, p. 110) For Conant smallness invited not democracy but the tyranny of rural and village willingness to overlook the needs of the academically talented. He even hesitated to tell one correspondent of instructional innovations made in some small schools for fear of encouraging the continuation of high schools with fewer than 400 students (Hampel, 1986, pp. 70-71).

The elementary schools had a lower threshold to reach. Mindful of individual differences, teachers could nevertheless focus on basic skills that all students could and should grasp. Grouping, when appropriate, could occur within each classroom. As long as there was one separate class for each grade level, the elementary school could be of relatively modest size in comparison with high schools. Educators preferred two sections per grade level as a reasonable minimum, so a school with five grades and approximately 25 students per class (more on class size later) would have 250 students, 5/8ths the size of Conant's minimally acceptable high school.

A LARGE BUILDING OFFERS MORE AND BETTER OPPORTUNITIES TO STUDENTS

Some of the shortcomings of old and ill-equipped classrooms could have been remedied inside small structures, whether renovated or newly built. The lack of maps, globes, dictionaries, desks, blackboards and other instructional tools could have been fixed by purchasing those items rather than erecting the impos-

ing fortress many schools resembled. Remodeling could have alleviated other concerns--cramped rooms, dim lighting, poor ventilation, inefficient heating, and unhealthful sanitation. With enough carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and other skilled workers, the old buildings could have been dramatically improved, and sometimes they were (Fuller, 1982; Link, 1986; Taggart, 1988; Walker, 1996).

Where the small school seemed hopelessly inadequate was not its provision of regular classroom space; the lack of specialized rooms, on the one hand, and the absence of large multipurpose rooms, on the other hand, was seen as the insurmountable problem. The large school could more readily provide space and equipment for vocational courses (especially home economics for girls and various shops for boys). Art, music, and drama could be taught in smaller schools, but they lacked ample space for storage and for performances. Athletics, the fast growing part of the curriculum during the enrollment surge of the 1930s, required extensive space, indoors and outdoors.

The most popular checklist used to evaluate school buildings reflected the importance educators attached to "special classrooms," which accounted for 140 of the 1,000 points on the Strayer-Engelhardt scorecard. All of the regular classrooms received 145 points. Both totals were well below the 270 points allocated for the building's internal systems—heating, lighting, electrical, plumbing, and more (Strayer and Engelhardt, 1924).

Rooms designed to serve the entire school (which got 140 points from Strayer and Engelhardt) could be more readily justified whenever educators could point out how many students would utilize those costly sites—libraries, lunchrooms, auditoriums, swimming pools, and study halls were considered too expensive if not used, frequently, by hundreds of students. The economies of scale seemed compelling (educators acknowledged that financial savings were not guaranteed by larger size; all they could promise was that "modern" facilities were not lavish or wasteful. The per capita annual operating costs of new and larger buildings were sometimes less, sometimes more, than required by smaller schools; the advantages of a large school were worth the price, educators argued. Sher, 1977, ch. 2).

The large school building won respect not just for the array of rooms inside. Its external appearance made manifest beliefs about education, especially the students' character and behavior. The early to mid 19th century resemblance to churches proclaimed the moral aspects of public schooling. As buildings got larger and larger in the late 19th century, many educators rhapsodized about the powerful lessons of order, health, and economy taught to students by the scale and solemnity of the fortress-like high schools in most cities and many towns. The austerity of many buildings matched the no-nonsense formality of the teaching and learning in most classrooms. In contrast, the rural schools that were shabby, such as those that had been converted from barns, grocery stores, poolrooms, cheese factories, and sheep pens, might be reassuringly familiar sights, but could those makeshift sites impress students as a special and important place, inspiring students to live up to the dignity of a civic monument? (Cutler, 1989; Reese, 1995; "Rural Teachers" 1953).

LARGER SCHOOLS ATTRACT AND RETAIN BETTER TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Small schools supposedly could not offer the professional attractions of a career in a larger school and district. The chance to specialize in one subject was rare in the small school, and educators had little respect for the notion of the teacher as a generalist beyond the elementary grades. Few supervisors were close at hand to lend assistance. The help that was available—state departments of education "rural supervisors," summer "institutes", normal school courses—was sparse and patchy (in part because many officials and professors yearned to close small schools, not find ways to improve them. Link, 1986, p. 128; Spaulding, 1927, ch. 8; Weiler, 1998, pp. 71-75).

For teachers interested in a rewarding career, the larger, urban districts beckoned. Usually the salaries and benefits were better than rural compensation. Tenure was more common there. So were opportunities to earn advanced degrees in the evenings and summers. Of great importance was the liberation from constant surveillance. Well into the 20th century, many teachers in small towns

and villages were expected to act like saints, forsaking any recreation and leisure that might be controversial. The teacher was expected to be a model of virtue and self-restraint, a spotless example of irreproachable habits. Smoking, drinking, dating, or skipping church were out of the question. In the cities, in contrast, relentless oversight of teachers' personal lives was all but impossible (Cubberly, 1912, p. 28; Reese, 1998, p. 32; Rufi, 1926, ch. 5).

If the worklife of an urban teacher seemed good, the jobs for administrators there looked superb. The ambitious young administrator's career path led to larger and larger districts. The salaries were significantly larger, and the turnover wasn't nearly as rapid as it has been in urban districts since the 1960s. Urban districts were praised as models of innovation and progress, and an informal national network of (white male Protestant) school chiefs reinforced the sense of being at the center of the action. The worst excesses of large districts seemed to be over by the early 20th century. Before then, urban school management was lambasted as byzantine and corrupt. There were too many small-fry politicians on the school boards, and far too many boards, often one for each ward. Self-serving boards frequently overrode their superintendents in order to give staff jobs to cronies and award lucrative building and supply contracts to other friends. By the early 20th century, urban districts were in better shape as credentialed experts keen on scientific management techniques ran the sprawling systems like a huge corporation. But the rural districts' superintendents not only lacked the training and talent of their urban counterparts, they were usually at the mercy of school trustees and the voters. Administration was informal, enmeshed in village factionalism, and subject to votes on issues such as textbooks and curriculum that in the cities had become topics for the experts to handle (Fuller, 1982; Link, 1986; Reynolds, 1999; Tyack, 1974).

The scorn of small rural districts' lack of professional careers in education was part of a broader theme: The words "small" and "rural" were often used synonymously in discussions of school size, and the criticisms of rural schools were also criticisms of many aspects of rural life apart from education.

Many rural residents fought school and district consolidation. They valued the neighborhood school as the heart and soul of the community. Athletics,

music, and drama offered entertaining performances for everyone to enjoy. Moral vigilance was also possible when village youth stayed near home rather than ride a bus to attend school in a larger town with poolrooms, juvenile delinquency, and other deplorable temptations. Even worse, the loss of an area's only school raised fears of dwindling population and economic ruin. The town's vitality would supposedly ebb without a school to attract people (Barron, 1997, ch. 2; Peshkin, 1982). Because the school was cherished for reasons above and beyond the academic and vocational training of the young, the defense of the small rural school was often intense and prolonged. Left to their own wishes, most rural districts would not have joined with others. In the words of Alan Peshkin, author of two superb case studies of rural resistance to consolidation, "residents react to the imminent loss of their school with a passion comparable to that of people who feel their cultural survival jeopardized when their native language is threatened" (Peshkin, 1978, p. 202). Consolidation hinged on the ability and willingness of the state legislatures to intervene. Rather than mandate change, most legislatures relied on offers of substantial financial incentives to rural districts if they would merge. The legislators preferred to extend new assistance for transportation and construction costs, but sometimes they withdraw old assistance such as the tuition paid by the state when a tiny district sent its teenagers elsewhere for high school (Krug, 1972; American Association of School Administrators, ch. 9; National Education Association, 1948, ch. 7).

To most prominent educators, the rural devotion to small schools and districts reflected deeper problems with rural life. In some areas, especially the South, the challenge was poverty. In more prosperous regions, the residents were too cheap and too conservative to recognize and support educational progress. To Stanford's Professor Ellwood Cubberly, the farmers were "penny-wise" and "unprogressive" (Cubberly, 1912, p. 12). In Iowa, "rural resistance was perceived to be based on irremediable ignorance or reactionary perniciousness to be ignored, if possible, and marginalized, if not" (Reynolds, 1999, xi). The smallest villages hurt themselves by not aligning with larger towns where wealthier farmers and businessmen were increasingly in control of agrarian life. Only by becoming more cosmopolitan could the rural areas keep their youth from leaving.

One important upshot of casting school size as a matter of rural values and behaviors was a lost opportunity to debate the shortcomings of larger schools. Rarely did the rural proponents of small schools fight consolidation on the grounds of instructional practices. They might defend “the basics” and assail the larger schools’ curriculum as “frills,” but usually the opponents of consolidation presented no original vision of school reform, no alternatives to the pedagogy and curriculum in larger schools. A fresh vision of agricultural education, creative uses of local volunteers, ambitious projects to revitalize community health and housing: those bold ways to enrich rural education were rare (and would have required immense energy, considerable imagination, and sharp breaks with traditional instruction). When there was a progressive educator in small schools, usually she tried to show that she could match what larger schools did, not strike out for different ground (Reynolds, 1999, p. 13; Reeves, 1945, pp. 86-106; Weber, 1946).

WHAT MATTERS MOST IS CLASS SIZE, NOT SCHOOL SIZE

Where does learning take place? Educators often speak of the “ethos” or culture of a school—the norms and traditions that extend beyond individual classrooms. We refer to the “hidden curriculum” embedded in rules and regulations, public address system announcements, peer pressure, and more. We know that learning can occur anywhere in a school, and that size is one important component of the culture of a particular school.

That point of view was certainly not unknown before the 1960s, but until then another perspective on schooling was more common. Educators and parents stressed the individual classroom as the place where learning happened. Within schools of all sizes, there were classrooms, and they looked remarkably similar from school to school (and within each school). For the mainstream academic subjects, the rooms were usually comparable in size and, more importantly, had roughly the same number of students. A student in a school of 200 or 2000 would be likely to see about 30 classmates for English, Algebra, biology, and other subjects. A fourth grade class would hold about the same number of students in the third or fifth grades or in the fourth grade class across the hall (Pauly, 1991).

As schools became larger and larger, the average size of individual classrooms remained steady throughout the first half of the century, then declined substantially in the next four decades. From 1950 to 1990, the student/teacher ratio in elementary schools dropped from 30 to 18, and the same ratio in high schools also declined, from 21 to 15 (U.S. Department of Education, 1990, p. 44). Union contracts often stipulated maximum class sizes, but even before the spread of collective bargaining, there was widespread agreement that more than 30 students was a heavy burden for a conscientious teacher, especially for a high school teacher who had five or six classes (Research Division, 1953).

Some classes have routinely exceeded 30 students, but they were usually the nonacademic courses. A survey at mid-century found that only 4.5% of the classes in high schools with more than 1,000 students had 50 students or more. Nearly 60% of those were physical education classes (the fastest growing part of the high school curriculum in the 1930s and 1940s). The other 40% were in chorus, band, study hall, health, and music. The lean budgets during the Great Depression increased academic subjects' class sizes for several years but not as rapidly or as permanently as the increases in gym, where larger numbers did not evoke an outcry (Tompkins, 1949; Angus and Mirel, 1999, ch. 3).

The class size rationale for large schools did not win universal agreement, to be sure. For students, there was always time outside of the classroom—minutes and hours when no adult knew or cared what they were doing. It was easy to sneak out of a large school, and perilously easy to sneak in drugs, guns, and other horrors. For teachers, life was lonesome when they rarely saw their fellow teachers and hardly knew the administrators. If isolation brought privacy and freedom, it also meant long odds for a robust community within the faculty. The focus on class size was a narrow view of what makes for a good school (and parents with the will and means to send their children to private schools consistently preferred schools a fraction of the size of the public alternative).

FROM PARENTS AND STUDENTS

This essay concentrated on five reasons why educators were convinced that bigger was better. It is important to acknowledge that the same essay could be written from the perspectives of both students and parents. If so, we would see additional defenses of large scale.

By mid-century, many parents had spent their lives in corporations of unprecedented size. They depended on big companies for salaries, benefits, and security unavailable to the previous generation. As workers and managers, they accepted and welcomed the rise of colossal structures, notwithstanding some misgivings. Higher buildings, taller dams, longer bridges, bigger factories, huge armies, more conglomerates, hundred billion dollar federal peacetime budgets: why should schools remain small when everything else was expanding? (Frum, 2000, Part 1)

From students, several justifications of large scale would be heard. For those who loved school and excelled, bigness meant more opportunities—elective courses, guidance counselors to help with college admissions, and, best of all, dozens of extracurricular clubs and teams where they flourished, with a large audience of less talented but respectful classmates watching and cheering. For those who hated school, bigness meant less pain and suffering. For a 15 year old boy required but displeased to be a student, a large school offered more anonymity, more chances to disengage (both physically, by cutting classes, and mentally, by signing up for easy ones). If he did show up, behave, do a modest amount of work, and graduate rather than drop out, it is unlikely that any adult knew him well, gave him individual attention and advice, or pushed him to do more. He probably welcomed rather than resented that freedom, especially when his afternoons and evenings were more monitored than they usually are today. More mothers were home at 3 p.m. to supervise the hours after school. If not, other adults in the neighborhood were around to see and report mischief. More families ate dinner together than they do now. Many youth felt so regulated that the chance to be anonymous in the school was a relief, a welcome opportunity to be on one's own, not a hurtful form of neglect (Greene, 1987). Why the faith in large schools wavered and declined in the 1970s and later is a question beyond the scope of this

paper. What I hope this paper made clear is that staunchly held American attitudes toward size took shape for many reasons. One implication of that point: it is remarkable that the advocates of smaller scale have, within several decades, made such formidable inroads on those sturdy old commitments. It is clear from *Small Schools; Great Strides* that the commitment is more than ideological. Studies of small schools in Chicago and elsewhere report many tangible benefits—higher test scores, lower dropout rates, less student anonymity, better safety, stronger faculty collegiality, and more.

There is another implication of my remarks. The fact that the defense of large scale had so many sources suggests that advocates of small schools will need to advance multiple arguments as they make their case. Throughout our history, notions of proper scale intertwined with more than one or two deeply felt assumptions and beliefs. It is thus heartening to hear the small school advocates refer to academic, emotional, political, equity, and safety issues as they now build their case. An array of arguments for small schools will be a sounder strategy than relying on one single claim.

NOTES

1. Conant, like most American educators, spent more energy attacking very small schools than he devoted to establishing the optimal size of a good school. The problem to be solved was the rash of small schools, and the mode of attack was to dwell on the most blatant shortcomings of smallness, avoiding the harder task of determining and promoting an ideal size, either a single figure or a range. That approach had the same spirit as another reform popular in the early to mid 20th century, "foundation" state aid to local school districts—minimums for per pupil expenditure under which it was unacceptable to fail. Once past the threshold of tolerable size, or spending, the problem would no longer be urgent, Conant and others argued.

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