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*Small Schools* White Paper: A Meta-Study on the Benefits of *Small Schools*

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Abstract

This paper is a review of the literature on the benefits of *small* (or *smaller*) schools when compared to larger or middle sized schools in six key areas that are of national concern as well as of concern to every parent and school leader: (A) safety, (B) teaching conditions, (C) academic performance, (D) Culture of Equal Opportunity on Campus, (E) Learning Choices and curriculum and (F) costs of schooling. The research shows very strong *small school* advantages in all except cost. The issue of cost is inconclusive and in dire need of additional research. Based upon the areas of concern, the authors surmise that, if schools of 350 students or less only were considered, we would find American schools to rank at the top of any international ranking. Various strategies for breaking down schools are provided. The essay concludes with a recommendation for new forms of school evaluation and new performance standards that are better predictors of American prosperity.

*Small Schools* White Paper: A Meta Study on the Benefits of *Small Schools*

By Stuart Grauer

“I spent years where I did not have a meaningful conversation with a teacher.” - Sal Khan, Founder, Khan Academy

“Smaller, more intimate learning communities consistently deliver better results in academics and discipline when compared to their larger counterparts. Big schools offer few opportunities to participate.” -- Washington Post, 8/15/02

Amidst a steady hundred-year American trend towards larger secondary schools, we set out to study *small school* benefits. We were aware of various myths distorting our collective viewpoints about what a school should be, and our research turned up more. We were equally aware of an historic gap of knowledge on the benefits of *small schools*, and this was borne out; but the big surprise that turned up in our research was the dearth of information on the relative benefits of the nation’s larger schools, the consolidated, comprehensive school model which predominates in our nation.

The historical rationale for consolidated, comprehensive schools—economies of scale, social equality, and increased program offerings—were widely known (Nguyen). The alarming part was that these assumed benefits had virtually never been verified and, as we weighed large schools in the balance against *small schools* we found them—all three of them—to be either questionable or outright false.

The prevalent, large school model had evolved very gradually and was not the result of a comprehensive plan, and so no one could state a single place or point in time where a threshold had been crossed and the old ways were not working. But, of course,

we never see a tree growing. Tried and true presumptions about the American schoolhouse were running on hyperbole, myths mistaken for reality. No one was to blame, but our schools had grown too big for most of our kids and teachers.

In this paper we provide a review of the literature on the benefits of *small* (or *smaller*) secondary schools when compared to large- or middle-sized schools in six key areas that are of national concern as well as of concern to every parent. We then draw some conclusions and make some recommendations.

In Part 1, we focus specifically on the first three of those six areas of concern. All three are areas where there is fairly little disagreement that *small schools* do better than large: (A) safety, (B) teaching conditions, (C) academic performance. The cases for these are overwhelming and not difficult to make.

Part 2 of this paper focuses on the basics of three more *small schools* benefits, which deserve special consideration because each of these has, for a good many years, been taken on faith as a benefit and justification for large schools, we observe, to the detriment of many: (D) culture of connectedness and inclusiveness (including equal opportunity for underserved groups), (E) learning, curricular and extra-curricular choices and (F) costs of schooling. We will then draw some conclusions and make some recommendations.

## I. WHAT IS A *SMALL SCHOOL*?: *SMALL* AND *SMALLER*

Our research on *small schools* began as a simple numbers game. There was little agreement on what *small* meant. We found *small* to be used variously as an absolute enrolment number and a relative number. Extensive research eventually led us define *small schools* as those with an absolute number of less than 400 students (Grauer, 2012c); however, because the field is lacking in consensus about such matters, we often had to draw conclusions about *small schools* based upon their substantially “smaller” size, i.e., their size relative to the schools to which they are compared. Typically, in our research, *smaller* meant at least 500 students less than the comparison schools. (Many medium sized schools, typically of sizes of between 500 and 900 were not useful in

helping us draw comparisons—those schools are neither small nor large.) For example, a 1999 U.S. Department of Education study found that schools with more than 1000 students had far higher rates of violent student behavior than schools with fewer than 300 students, and teachers and students in *small schools* were far less likely to be victims of crime. The entire range of schools from between 300 to 1000 students was cut out of that study so a robust comparison could be made (Lawrence et al., 2002).

Another issue which has hampered decisive research in past years is that *small schools* are not always easy to identify operationally or with respect to governance. They include private college preparatory schools, parochial schools, charter schools, schools within schools (SWASs), “smaller learning communities” (SLCs), rural schools, magnet schools, home schools, and any number of other such configurations other than “comprehensive.” For better or for worse, if its goal is to provide full services for every kind of learner, it is not likely to be a *small school*.

## 2. THE ABC'S OF SMALL SCHOOL BENEFITS: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Emerging research on *small school* benefits has thickened over the past three decades. Our review covered hundreds of *small schools*, including various site visits. We reviewed many studies of research studies, quite a few of them meta-studies which reviewed many earlier studies; so our sample size is large--too big to know--and our conclusions were drawn based upon this rich description. For instance, we considered the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's well-known review of more than 100 studies and evaluations, wherein *small schools* author Cotton noted "small schools to be superior to large schools on most measures and equal to them on the rest. This holds true for both elementary and secondary students of all ability levels and in all kinds of settings" (1996). Bearing out Cotton's work, Wasley and Lear's 2001 study of students in 90 small schools showed significant improvements in behavior and achievement, greater teacher connection with parents, more teacher opportunities to collaborate with other teachers. Haller's "High School and Beyond" included data for 175 rural high schools suggest that creating larger institutions will increase student misbehavior. New

York City created and generated findings on 105 small high schools, showing student mainly in Brooklyn and in the Bronx from 2005 to 2008 had substantially higher graduation rates than their large school peers (Bloom & Unterman, 2012). What follows is a sampler of research findings that detail the benefits of *small schools*.

A. Safety: A Moral Imperative

***Compared to larger schools, students in smaller schools fight less, feel safer, come to school more frequently, and report being more attached to their school. -- Nathan and Thao***

However positive and efficacious our research was showing *small schools* to be for student learning and opportunity, our findings on school safety are impossible to disregard and we feel a moral imperative to disseminate them.

*Small schools* are safer: urban, suburban, rural, and across the country, rich or poor, they are safer places for our children. Even the earliest research on *small schools* showed a stunning difference with respect to safety, violence and vandalism. The National Center on Education Statistics reported marked reductions in teacher and principal reports of incidents of fights, weapons, and other forms of violence in schools of 350 or fewer as compared with 750 student or more. *Small schools* report fewer fights and no incidents of serious violence (U.S. Department of Education, 1996-97). Through years of surveying, we found one common denominator: smaller school size has consistently related to stronger and safer school communities (Franklin & Crone, 1992; Oxley, 2004; Oxley, 2007; Nguyen, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 1996-97; Zane, 1994).

Greater safety in small versus large schools has been illustrated in a wide variety of types of incidents including robbery, vandalism, possession of weapons, verbal abuse of teachers, use of illegal drugs and alcohol, and widespread disorder in classrooms (Nathan & Thao, 2001). We note, safety is not confined to physical security, it is also psychological. The greatest reason for student enthusiasm in *small schools* appears to be the sense of support, belongingness and safety they provide (U.S. Department of

Education, 1996-97).

The push for smaller schools took on a greater sense of urgency after the horrific 1999 shooting at Colorado's Columbine High School (and subsequent shootings) (Raywid & Oshiyama, 2000). Many observers were and still are convinced that Columbine's large size—almost 2,000 students in a rather enclosed campus compound—helped create an atmosphere of isolation and anonymity for some students, particularly outcasts like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the murderers. After the Columbine incident, Colorado Governor Bill Owens formed a commission to assess how law enforcement, school officials, and others responded to the shooting and to identify the key factors that may have contributed to it. The 174-page report acknowledges that "the task of coping with school rage" is difficult at large schools, where students "tend to feel marginalized and less a part of a school community" than students at *small schools*. The commission concluded that "it is difficult for administrators in large schools to create a supportive atmosphere for students" (Hill, 2001).

Violence in many forms, ranging from passive and emotional to physically dangerous, is no longer difficult to find on America's medium- and large-sized campuses. For instance, among girls who responded to a 2011 survey, 56 percent reported being harassed over the preceding school year, as did 40 percent of boys did (Anderson, 2011). Another well known example is the high drug use in large, inner city schools of "underserved" populations, but there is a swept under the table parallel: in the San Diego and many well to do suburbs, the runaway recreational drug of choice for teens is heroin, which is in abundance. Comparatively speaking, safety issues and risks do not substantially present themselves on small campuses. Once again, the above few references are a small sampler among a good many more, unanimous research findings. It is impossible to dismiss school size as a powerful and fundamental indicator of safety for our America's children, and unconscionable to disregard the "costs" of this loss of safety, however difficult they are to grasp and affix.

## B. Teaching Conditions

***Small schools have been shown to have the conditions necessary for improvements in professional climates. -- Husbands & Beese, 2004***

Though a great many *large school* teachers are of course passionate about and masterful at their work, all surveys we found on this issue showed *small schools* to be more satisfying to teachers than medium and large schools. In fact, what will turn up for those who look carefully in the research on teaching conditions and morale in *small schools* is a tour de force, so long as the researcher considers schools of around 350 or less (and certainly under 400 students)—a powerful threshold no review of the literature had ever identified before us (Grauer, 2012c).

All research we could find showed that *small school* teachers felt more committed to their jobs and more efficacious in their work; they were reporting higher job satisfaction and a greater sense of responsibility for ongoing student learning. *Small school* teachers were using a greater variety of instructional strategies to interest students (Wasley et al. 2000; Oxley, 2006).

The *small school* social and professional environment seems to bear out extensive research on organizational behavior predicting the sense of connectedness in smaller, more intimate, organizations (Logan, King & Fischer-Wright, 2008). *Small schools* teachers reported a stronger professional community than teachers working in other high schools. There appears to be increased ability to build a coherent educational program for students between disciplines and across grade levels. There is less departmental stratification in *small schools*, and so teachers naturally collaborate more. (Oxley & Kassissieh, 2008; Wilson, 2006; Lee & Loeb, 2000) Along with the smaller size of the faculty, *small school* teachers often work relatively easily across departments. For instance, ESL teachers report ready collaboration with subject-area teachers, and teachers in general collaborate more with local community experts and groups. Such partnerships shake up traditional faculty segmentation, departmental alliances, and curricular compartmentalization, and all this makes school become a more authentic, interdisciplinary experience for learners.

### C. Academic Performance

***Smaller high schools are more engaging environments and produce greater gains in student achievement -- Nathan and Thao***

We looked into the comparative academic performance of students in small and large schools, something many parents and professionals of course consider to be of critical concern in school choice. We understood there was some prejudice against or skepticism about *small schools* by large school proponents who claimed that large schools, by virtue of having more homogeneously tracked and Advanced Placement courses, would be more rigorous academically. We found an absence of any research showing this prejudice to be justified. Researchers overwhelmingly were reporting that students learned more in *smaller schools* (Howley & Bickel, 2000; Husbands and Beese, 2004; Lee & Smith, 1997).

For standardization mavens, students in *small schools* (urban, suburban and rural) were reported to outperform students in large schools on standardized achievement tests, and significantly so (Raywid, 1980; Bryk & Driscoll, 1998; Gladden, 2000). Students in *small schools* also were getting more units before graduating high school. They were more college ready: they had higher grade point averages and improved their reading scores by almost a half-year grade equivalency more than their counterparts in large schools; and, they were absent from school much less (Bloom & Unterman, 2012; Bryk & Driscoll, 1998; Gladden, 2000; Hu, 2012; Nathan and Thao, 2001; Raywid 1980, Wasley et al., 2000).

Teaching style tends to be different in *small schools*: teachers tend to use a broader range of strategies to engage a wider band of student learning styles (Wasley et al., 2000). Research turned up a stronger sense of accountability between students, teachers, and parents. Teachers in *small schools* set higher expectations of students, which lead to high expectations among the students themselves. Students' attachment, persistence, and performance all appear stronger in *small schools* compared to *large schools* (Wasley et al. 2000).

*Small schools* appear to have a greater focus on academics; students report high levels of respect among classmates, and a greater tendency to support academic achievement than students in conventional schools where social identification and popularity are more salient determinants of student status. The Gates funded study of 21,000 students—one of the most expensive and comprehensive small schools studies found clear gains in graduation rates, basic skills, and college readiness based upon Regents exam scores. Included in the college readiness concept of these *small schools* was not only enrolments of around 400, but close student-teacher relationships and community partnerships and school themes like conservation or law (Bloom & Unterman, 2012).

These are huge claims for which we cite here just sample references among a great many more, but, as Raywid generalized, "The value of small schools has been confirmed with a clarity and a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research" (Raywid, 2000).

#### D. Culture of Connectedness and Equal Opportunity on Campus

##### ***Learning is more equitably distributed in smaller schools.***

Large school proponents cite greater social choice and diversity as pluses for the large school model. They add that big teams and many clubs promote spirit and opportunity for more students. Are these presumptions borne out in research?

This is a complex issue containing political, social, and emotional components, among others. Research consistently reveals that in *small schools*, students of all "types" feel they can connect with one another much more readily and openly, and also with caring adults whom they know quite personally. If well led, a school develops its own, unique culture of belonging and achievement. The true *small school* offers a greater sense of relationship connectedness and opportunity among virtually all stakeholders, such as are implicit in small organizations and communities (Cotton, 2006). Among complex organizations, developing a unique, shared culture is more likely where the organization is small.

Wasley et al. (2001), Nathan and Thao (2001), and many other researchers over the past generation have found that *small schools* create communities where students are “known, encouraged, and supported” and have increased teacher-student connection. Small schools of less than 400 “demonstrate great achievement equity” (Fouts, Abbor, & Baker, 2002). “Students at large schools are more prone to be alienated from their peers or engage in risky behavior” (Nathan & Thao, 2001). Smaller, more “communal” learning environments reduce both student and teacher alienation commonly identified in larger school systems, and enhance student engagement in learning. Students report feeling more comfortable and safe in a *small school* environment, which is easily understandable given the increased safety of the small environment (Jimerson, 2006; Nathan & Thao, 2001). In sum, the culture of *small schools* in particular typically revolves around hard work, high aspirations, respectful relationships with others, and the expectation that all students will succeed.

We have long looked to our schools to be places of equal opportunity across groups. Progressives of the early 1900s started the push for school consolidation so that underserved populations could partake of the benefits available in more affluent schools and districts. They did this without considering whether enlarging the school might cause it to lose the very benefits it sought to have shared across ethnic and socio-economic borders. Movements towards consolidation recurred in the late 1900s, from the 1970s through the 90s, and schools again surged ahead in size—while complaints of inequality in school have hardly subsided. And while some gains in social justice have been made, few researchers would credit those gains to our schools.

With runaway school consolidations, might equal opportunity proponents have unwittingly thrown the baby out with the bathwater? A literature review of the sense of connectivity and safety at school lead us to probably the most profound findings in all our research: Learning is more equitably distributed in smaller schools (Lee & Smith, 1997 as cited in Husbands and Beese, 2004; Cotton, 1996). *Small schools* create more opportunities for participation per capita; a larger percentage of students participate

and they participate in more kinds of activities (Black, 2002). Because *small schools* need a large percentage of students to fill each activity, they engage a broader cross-section of students, helping reduce social and racial isolation (Clotfelter, 2002). These are striking findings, given longstanding and almost universal large school claims to offer more diverse learning and socialization opportunities.

We wondered if “striking” was an alarmist word? For over a century, few local communities across the land were untouched if not radically reshaped in their composition and functioning as a consequence of school consolidation (Grauer, 2012b). And yet, a primary rationale for the school consolidation movement was to provide equitable access to schooling. Based upon the above and much other research, it is reasonable to surmise that we may have done well to organize our schools differently; for instance, keeping smaller, unconsolidated schools (or schools within schools) but mixing their demographics may have created the equitable access that policy makers and interest groups have sought all along. Students who participate in activities and feel connected at school have higher achievement, are less likely to drop out; they have higher self-esteem, attend school more regularly, and have fewer behavior problems (Howley & Bickel, 2000). If these are gains our consolidated school movement has sought, we simply must consider whether a century of consolidations creating larger and larger campuses has been a grave miscalculation. The creation of large, consolidated schools appears to have created or perpetuated the problems it was meant to solve.

The sense of connectedness in *small schools* is not only felt and shared among students, it is shared by virtually all stakeholders and, in particular, with teachers. Research shows that in *small schools*, relationships between students and adults are strong, trusting, and ongoing. There is much more advising going on, either formally or informally. Almost any *small school* student or alumni can tell you that, although this is not always easy to measure. This leads to a clearer, safer, more enriched path to graduation and postgraduate plans, which are easier to measure--and the bonds

continue on longer after graduation. Secondly, relationships with parents are strong and ongoing. Likewise, *small school* parents are closer and have higher levels of parental involvement, and parental involvement is a critical factor in student success (Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). Thirdly, *small schools* have a leaner administrative structure, and the consequence of this is that the whole faculty shares in decision-making; decision-making is less institutionalized and more flexible. This fact explains why teachers and students in *small schools* report feeling a greater sense of efficacy—they really have a say. Fourth, smaller schools more readily engage community-members in educating students. Internships are much more common, as are classroom and assembly visitors (per student). *Small schools* with their more open campuses tend to more frequently engage community members in evaluating curricular exhibits such as portfolios or attending student visual or performing arts showings.

As is true in small organizations in general, *small schools* have higher rates of participation than large. Research on group size and sense of belongingness comes not only from the field of education; we reviewed parallel studies from anthropology and sociology, plus breaking research on social networking, leadership, and organizational behavior. In small groups we sense our allies and rivals readily. Though all compassionate people strive to sense the connectedness of all humanity and all creation, we have practical and cognitive limits on how many people we can support, trust, and feel supported by in our daily lives so that we can live with a sense of high trust and low threat<sup>1</sup>. The advantages for leaders developing trusting, influence relationships in small groups are manifest. In sum, it would be extremely difficult to dispute this finding: *Small schools* offer students, teachers, and school leaders a substantially greater sense of connectedness, belonging and safety than large schools.

#### E. Learning Choices and Curriculum: A Myth Buster

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<sup>1</sup> British anthropologist Robin Dunbar, in studying this, has set the number at around 150 people, which has come to be known as “Dunbar’s Number.”

***“Increasing school size, especially beyond 400 students, does not typically result in a large increase in curricular offerings.” -- Slate & Jones***

It is often claimed that a big school offers more choices in courses and clubs. After our review of the literature, we came to view this as a flawed and reductionist way to view what “choice” really means to today’s student. A powerful but little known outcome of *small schools* is that, in vital respects, they provide students with more choices in their learning.

How can *small schools* students have a full range of curricular and extra-curricular choices? *Large school* proponents have routinely argued that large schools have more clubs, specialized classes, and sports. Indeed, big team sports are an American icon, which is difficult to attack. So, before we considered the verity of these of , we first noted an irony, that these features are only marginally a part any high school’s own quality metrics—they are virtually never held in greater esteem than safety or academic achievement, for instance. Deborah Meier, often credited as being a founder of the *small schools movement*, put it candidly: “When we talk with school officials and local politicians about restructuring large high schools, the first thing they worry about is what will happen to the basketball or baseball teams, the after-school program, and other sideshows; that the heart of the school, its capacity to educate, is missing, seems almost beside the point.” (Mitchell, 2000)

*Small schools* create more opportunities for participation, so a larger percentage of students participate and they participate in more kinds of activities (Black, 2002). The percentage of high school students engaged in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities is higher in *small schools*, possibly far higher. For illustration, at *small schools* there may not be as many teams or honors courses to pick from, but a greater percentage of students are on a team or in an honors course; also, a greater percentage of students are in multiples of such activities. Small size also makes it easier for teachers to organize hands-on learning opportunities that engage students in rigorous academic work that has meaningful consequences in the local community (Bloom & Unterman, 2012; Lawrence et al., 2002).

Next, we took a look at course offerings. After an extensive review of the literature, Slate and Jones found, “Increasing school size, especially beyond 400 students, does not typically result in a large increase in curricular choices. Furthermore ...by offering a smaller, more focused curriculum, *small schools* may actually be more able to maintain quality control than are larger schools” (2005). Barker and Gump (1964) collected data in secondary schools ranging in size from 35 to 2287 students. They also found that increases in school size did not clearly translate into large increases in curricular programming or curricular diversity. The largest schools had 65 times as many students as did the smaller schools but offered only twice as many courses. In addition, they found that much of the material covered in specialized courses at large schools was also being taught within regular courses at *small schools* (Slate & Jones, 2005).

A student who plays year-round varsity sports, enrolls in numerous advanced courses, and manages to stay segregated from the safety issues would appear be well suited to the large school. This, of course, does not account for the majority of America’s students.

**We wondered, will the *small high school* be able to offer a full curriculum in the future?** One answer is that the *small school*, past or future, is best at responding to individual student interests and needs. The classroom of tomorrow is offering new kinds of access to learning and methodology: interactive distance learning is equalizing course selections for all school sizes. Emerging software is allowing tutors to meet with students online—the small school has worldwide resources and outreach. Also, new configurations of “choice” are emerging; for instance, consider several schools (or *schools within a school* [SWASs]) collaborating to establish an interactive television network that allows a teacher in any of those schools to teach students on the network. *Small schools* also share specially certified teachers for low demand courses: One school may have a Spanish teacher and another a physics teacher; each teacher can teach a class over the network and provide course access to students in all the networked schools. Interactive distance learning networks are less expensive to build

and operate than a new large school; they engage students with technology; and they preserve the advantages of *small schools* (Hobbs, 2003). The founding of the rapidly growing SWAS movement is often credited to Mary Anne Raywid (1928–2010), who wrote, “The bigger the school, the more it loses its humanity” (Raywid, 1980). SWASs are experimenting with exciting, “best of both worlds” ways in creating *smaller learning communities* while retaining big school resources like big-team sports and high end technology which might be too expensive for an individual *small school*.

If we wish to abandon America’s traditional emphasis on liberal arts schooling, “schooling for a democratic society,” and to re-orient our schools more into technical and vocational training grounds, sheer numbers of courses may help and big schools offering metal shop, computer programming and Urdu language might give our kids an edge. A liberal arts education, however, is more student-centered (as opposed to content-centered): more focused on intellectual development. It is the training grounds for entrepreneurship and ethics, and it has never been dependent upon a particularly large course catalog.

In conclusion, an exhaustive course and club catalog does not make a good school, nor is it fundamental as a determinant of excellent schooling or even accommodate diverse student tastes and interests: There are too many things that can occur in small arenas that can’t in big ones.

#### F. Costs

***“The ‘cost savings’ of larger schools are only apparent if the results are ignored.” --***

#### ***The New Rules Project***

If *large schools* were cheaper to operate in the long run, perhaps we might have some rationale for their overwhelming prevalence—we could simply say we cannot afford to do more; but there is great uncertainty in knowing if they really cost less. Research is still scattered and unreliable, but our own studies indicate that larger schools with enrollments in excess of 1,200 have not produced expected economies of

scale that result in better results for less money except possibly when compared with some *medium sized schools* (between 400 or 500 and at least 900)—and not when compared to true *small schools*. Naturally, this sounds counterintuitive at a gut level, but a real analysis has to go a whole lot further than the gut.

The larger and larger institutions we have been creating have failed to result in an economy of scale or to provide lower per-pupil costs. Formulas that our research found for determining funding tend to disguise tremendous non-cash costs associated closely with large schools; some of those costs are difficult to affix a price tag to, and some of them are terrible. Large school increased costs include:

- Increased drop out rates
- Increased violence
- Decreased sense of social safety and connectedness
- Lower teacher satisfaction and higher teacher turnover
- Lower achievement in college
- Less happiness

At present, the above costs are seldom considered to be actuarial realities (Grauer, *The Economics of Small Schools*). I mention the last, happiness, not as a luxury item and only because so much research ties it closely to our nation's overall productivity (Conley, 2007; Achor, 2012).

Add to these costs a greater percentage of administrative overhead and externals such as the astronomical cost of the federal education bureaucracy (currently costing about \$1000 per student nationwide), and the cost of large schools starts to look close to that of smaller, more personalized schools, if not higher in some analyses. Given the stakes, the dearth of thorough research and analysis on the comparative large-*small school* costs/benefits, at least research and literature with a medium and long-range perspective, is stunning.

In a remarkable accounting, Levin and Rouse penciled this out:

*When the costs of investment to produce a new graduate are taken into account, there is a return of \$1.45 to \$3.55 for every dollar of investment, depending upon*

*the educational intervention strategy. Under this estimate, each new graduate confers a net benefit to taxpayers of about \$127,000 over the graduate's lifetime. This is a benefit to the public of nearly \$90 billion for each year of success in reducing the number of high school dropouts by 700,000 — or something close to \$1 trillion after 11 years. (2012)*

The New Rules Project (2011) has summed up, as follows:

*[A]dvantages of small schools include improved dropout rates, higher grades and higher rates of college attendance. The “cost savings” of larger schools are only apparent if the results are ignored. If we consider the goal of schools to be improving the lives of students, enabling them to be better citizens, and earning higher incomes (therefore paying higher taxes) then smaller schools are actually much more cost effective than larger schools. All of that is before you even begin to factor in such things as “sense of community” or physical safety...*

## 5. EDUCATIONAL MYTH BUSTING AND THE SMALL SCHOOLS MOVEMENT

Powerful and often compelling myths about “real” schooling tend to govern our collective assumptions about normalcy, and these myths have silently, steadfastly advanced the move to larger, more consolidated schools and hampered any real proliferation of the *small schools* model.

Why do we keep the focus on building gigantic schools when we now have over 30 years of promising *small schools* data. Has our nation not reached a time when some new directions are desperately sought? Here is one big reason the data are ignored: cultural expectations about high school are deeply embedded. Wasley and Lear painted this astonishing picture:

Our collective memory of high school includes nostalgia such as proms, football games, exciting social lives, romance, and first cars. No matter that such memories do not apply to most students. The average high school student does not attend sporting events; indeed the larger the school, the smaller the percentage of student participation in these activities. For most students, the

social scene in large high schools is tough and unforgiving, with sharp distinctions made between the small group of social haves and the far larger masses of have-nots. And high school memories seldom include a significant academic component, let alone an intellectual one (2001).

Today's iconic high schools have activities that everyone speaks of with pride, things that the general public now believes to be "the real world"—sacred cows like the marching band, the lacrosse team, the boosters. These untouchable activities represent the school's image and focus on pride. They arduously resist change, even though they serve a relatively small percentage of students and rarely have any connection to the most fundamental aspects of excellent schooling: a focus on student learning and happiness, and a focus on the development of shared values. In the shadows of these myths are more kids with drug, obesity, or anorexia problems than the football or cheer teams can accommodate; these are the troubling realities that characterize life in today's comprehensive, consolidated, *large school* arena.

A profound irony pervades our country: for a generation or two, our "post-industrial" nation's most successful businesses have been adopting team approaches, quality circles, small work groups, more horizontal management structures, and "tribal" organizing. During this same time, an educational movement towards standardization, rigid management, and misguided concepts of economy of scale keep the *small school* movement in its marginal place in federal, state and district education funding formulas. The reason that's a shame is simple: because no football team or cheer squad, no AP catalog, no million dollar editing room could mean, alternatively: rarely a third row, almost no vandalism or violence, few cliques, and less drop outs. It's a power trade off, a lifestyle choice, an alternative myth about who we might be as a society. Our vision of American society is incongruent with our vision of community. Myths of "normalcy" ensure that the average American rarely imagines a real choice.

#### INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND MEGA-SCHOOLS

*Small schools* compete in the marketplace, on their community playing fields,

with their prime stakeholders: parents and community members. Their small size promotes an openness, which makes gatekeeping difficult and minimizes separation of administrators and leaders from constituents. On a campus of 200 people, there's nowhere to hide. In today's technology parlance, *small schools* are more "open source," transparent by design. In the case of private schools, which feature a greater percentage of true *small schools*, there is nothing more fundamental to American prosperity than their existence: their patrons vote with their dollars. In virtually no other market, goods or services, is such a powerful statement of patronage made: 11% of the country consistently pays for an expensive service for their children that they know they could get for free. With due respect to our big-school sacred cows like big teams that only large schools can feature, it is easy to surmise that, if small private schools were free, that 11% could turn into 50% quickly and those cows would seem less sacred. American actual and hidden (and long-range) public high school costs are approaching the point where this could be possible.

*Small schools* make space for uniqueness and the emergence of individual student voices. There is no known study that has found large-school achievement or safety superior to small, yet we hang on, strapping schools even tighter with funding contingencies that invite mediocrity (McRobbie, 2001).

Advocates of national testing standards for teachers and students believe they are putting these players on an internationally competitive and entrepreneurial playing field. They may cite competition in test scores and varsity teams as examples of their competitive nature. Unfortunately, this promotes a narrow band of competition, an arena that is just as fenced in as today's large high school complex. If we wanted schools to compete in things that matter to families and things that will most directly lead us towards a happier, more productive country, let schools of all sizes compete with one another on three-dimensional data:

- Student safety (physical and emotional, real and perceived)
- Teacher, student and parent ratings of trust and liking for the school
- Student and teacher feelings of belongingness and morale in the organization

- College admissions and completion rates
- Student and teacher happiness

Though discussed routinely in news columns, few such measures have made their way into public funding schemes, which tend to eschew both qualitative and long-range orientations. *Small schools* and most private schools compete and survive all of the above critical measures of enduring quality and success. Institutionalization of evaluation leads to one-dimensional evaluation strategies. It is time to shift to **3-D teacher and student evaluation**. If we are after a strong country of free individuals and entrepreneurship, let us replace the current student testing and data in every school, throw it out, all of it, and replace it with the Milgram Test! Let us see if we are educating individuals. Let us find *real* standards.

The Chinese government, as coded into law in 2010, has institutionalized the management of human reincarnation: In China, you may only pursue reincarnation within state regulations. And as preposterous as Chinese regulation might sound to Americans, today's nationalization, standardization, and bureaucratic regulation of education would take our parents in the 50s and 60s equally by surprise, almost certainly registering as fearfully socialistic or Orwellian on their radars.

Perhaps it is any large government's inclination to institutionalize. And yet it is the citizen's role to remain free. Charters, private schools, parochials schools, SWASs: these are all fundamental acts of freedom and entrepreneurship. People naturally seek relationships first, and large institutions have a way of adding limits, lines and hard edges to those relationships; here is the heart of the matter: teaching and learning depend upon, first, deepening personal relationships. In fact, despite many years of calling our nation's comprehensive schools "great equalizers," underserved families do not generally select our comprehensive schools: more charter schools locate where populations are diverse in terms of race and adult education levels. (Glomm, Harris & Lo, 2005). It remains to be seen what percentage of our populace would choose mega-schools.

## CONCLUSIONS

Having been responsible for accrediting a good many schools across the American Southwest, I can confess that they are not always easy to evaluate and measure. I have seen beautiful and serendipitous organizations buckle and fold under the weight of metrics that have been forced upon them, or that they have thrust upon themselves in an effort to conform. I understand the need for reliable metrics on school performance, and yet I remain acutely aware that forcing artful educating into standardized performance kills both. I believe the answer lies in balance.

As standards mavens, government funders, and policy makers, and all the other people who rarely spend a day with students conjure up funding formulas and demands for metrics and standards, we recommend they consider some more dimensions of measurement, such as how safe the kids feel. Or average daily joyfulness. Why not measure how close the students feel to their teachers? How efficacious they feel? Or how strong their aspirations are? Let us measure how connected teachers feel to other teachers and to their students. Or how many alumni visit every year? All of these will be improved predictors of a prosperous American future. Once our district and our Department of Education officials start measuring more of the things that matter the most, they are going to find a very different kind of school organization measuring up. Indeed, in aggregate, our nation's *small schools* already measure up. Right now, peeling away the bureaucratic veneers of our DOE would reveal that our true aim is to develop a third rate imitation of the Korean math program.

We wish for America a preference for *accountable individuality*. In our own admissions office in Southern California, we consistently find home-schooled students, who have remained outside of our public system, to be more sophisticated, calmer, and more articulate than students coming from medium and large sized schools. Strangely, they tend to test higher on standardized tests than students coming in from large systems that directly prep for such tests. We have learned to bank on this. One *small school* director of admissions had this to write in, unsolicited:

“EVERY applicant I have interviewed this season has expressed a desire for a

healthy working relationship with their teachers. I'm always really touched by this. They all express a desire for teachers who are mentors, who encourage them, even push them, but do not demean them, and who take the time to listen to them and answer their questions. This latter part, answering their questions, is always expressed with great emotion. A lot of these kids are so frustrated by not understanding something, wanting to understand it, and then feeling stranded by their teachers. I find it extraordinary that these young people haven't given up searching for a suitable learning environment" (Braymen, personal communication, July 1, 2011).

This observation, coming from a quiet, suburban private school, is echoed at what might be viewed as the opposite setting. At the conclusion of the 2012 New York City's study of 105 *small schools*, Schools Chancellor noted that small high school changed lives "across every race, gender and ethnicity," concluding: "When we see a strategy with this kind of success, we owe it to our families to continue pursuing it aggressively" (Hu, 2012).

Many of our nation's students are fully engaged in team or large campus activities they love and in challenging course offerings and extra-curriculars that draw out their passions, and students like these may never need or consider *small schools*—it's just that these particular youths are a minority of all our nearly 20 million high school students.

Jimerson (2006) summed up our findings about *small schools'* effectiveness, which he has named "The Hobbit Effect:"

- (1) There is greater participation in extra-curricular activities, and that is linked to academic success;
- (2) *Small schools* are safer;
- (3) Kids feel they belong;
- (4) Small class size allows more individualized instruction;
- (5) Good teaching methods are easier to implement;
- (6) Teachers feel better about their work;
- (7) Mixed-ability classes avoid condemning some students to low expectations.

The aspirations of many school consolidation advocates to integrate the schools is obviously commendable. But aspirations have not lined up with results. What if we

found out that 100 years of consolidations has produced no clear results? What if we found out that mixing students of diverse neighborhoods into large schools only creates additional grouping and alienation? What if we even considered the notion that we may have been practicing consolidation for a full century and it has largely failed in its main goal: because *small schools* need a large percentage of students to fill each activity, they engage a broader cross-section of students, helping reduce social and racial isolation. (Clotfelter, 2002) Could it be that, for the past century, what we should have been doing is creating integrated *small schools* rather than lumping everyone into the consolidated model? The implications of this question, to us, are profound and provocative. If the answer to this question even might be “yes” and we have not researched this issue properly, it implies a full century of incalculable loss.

We have obviously not taken the time in this document to set forth the many advantages of large schools, as we have addressed a *small schools* research gap that needed bridging. None of the above facts and observations are intended as a part of a condemnation of our large schools and the districts that preside over them, or of the talents, gifts and dedication that their personnel bring to their students every day. For many students, large schools can be wonderlands of learning and friendship, and launch pads to productive, happy lives. But for many, not so; one size does not fit all. Let the above facts serve to illustrate that various school sizes have various advantages and that a school can never be all things to all people; our opinion is that this is why they fail.

One conclusion, for people who will never consider *small schools*, is that, even if you are a top-hierarchy leader at a large federal agency, a school superintendent, or the dean of a university school of education, there will never be a replacement for connecting in sustained relationships (not formulaic “site observations”) with the educators and parents in real communities. Daily, deep conversation with our students and parents is the primary source data we need still much more of; there, in our communities and neighborhoods, conversation is real and we can access the aspirations and fears that people share daily before trying to “fix” them with sweeping, external,

big-money systems and mega-schools that cater for every special interest except that of a single child looking for quality time with a caring adult. We can access local creativity and energy and honor local desire to be self-determining. Self-determination belongs in all our local communities far more than it does in the hands of a \$50 billion a year federal (D.O.E.) bureaucracy.

Parents with children at a very large high school may look at this research as a set of signposts pointing to areas where a smaller-scale, more personal approach can make a positive difference in their children's education. Students deserve to be free from worry about personal safety (physical and emotional) and to be confident that their teachers and administrators know them well and can guide their development of skills and knowledge. The United States, in its communities, has a long and rich history in trying various educational methods; only fairly recently have we begun to stand up against prevailing forces for system institutionalization, which we believe to run counter to that heritage. We need not let this be a long-range trend into the future.

End/

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