

# Introduction

We are offering this proposal to provide suggestions for alternatives to school closure. We also wish to prompt further consideration of the consolidation process and discussion of the school district's vision for the future.

One of the highlights of the Consolidation Blog set up by the Tacoma School District was the heartfelt testimonials written by members of the different school communities. They demonstrated how valuable all these schools are, with their different strengths and diverse learning environments. This is a credit to the school district. And they prompted the members of United Action to come together to focus on the district as a whole rather than just our individual schools.

Unfortunately, the current consolidation process has proved very divisive, with school communities pitted against each other and a public perception that the process has been neither fair nor transparent. We are concerned that, if the consolidation process continues unchanged, community support for the schools will be damaged. We are also concerned that consolidation itself could be costly to the school district: Not only could there be direct costs involved in closure; but the loss of schools could translate into a loss of educational options for the school district's future.

Our proposal therefore reflects these concerns. As requested, we do discuss alternatives to closure—offering suggestions for cost-cutting and ways to utilize surplus space in schools with low enrollment. However, in the second section we go on to cite our concerns regarding the consolidation process and the potential costs of closing schools. If a school is to be closed, we would like assurance that all the actual and hidden costs of school closure have been evaluated and weighed against the benefits.

In the final section, we discuss the advantages of small neighborhood schools. Again, we would like to know that these advantages have been considered before the district begins to close schools and the opportunities that they represent are lost.

The proposal is divided as follows:

- Section A: Alternatives to Closure
- Section B: Costs of Consolidation
- Section C: Benefits of Small Schools

# Section A: Alternatives to Closure

The suggestions for alternatives to closure fall into two categories: cost-cutting measures; and options for utilizing surplus space in low-enrollment schools.

**Cost-cutting Measures:** If one of the motives for closing schools is to reduce costs, then one alternative to closure is to reduce costs by other means. Due to time constraints, we were unable to find out the extent to which some of these measures have already been implemented. However, since they are all fertile areas for cost reduction, it seems worthwhile to list them here. In particular, we would urge the School District to position itself for the future by pursuing every means of reducing energy use.

**Utilizing Surplus Space:** Schools could share their building with administrative offices or lease space to compatible organizations such as preschools. In some cases, the schools could even capitalize upon their surplus space by entering into partnerships with community organizations that could bring services and resources to the school.

## Cost-cutting Measures

### Performance Review

An evaluative tool, such as a performance review, could be used to continuously assess whether programs and departments are running effectively or whether redundancies have crept into the system. Over time, in any institution, “things accrete.”

The school district’s finance and technology departments were both evaluated within the past few years. And this year stringent cost-cutting exercises were performed to meet the huge shortfall if the levy failed. However, a systematic process of evaluation could be instituted to assess programs and processes on a regular basis rather than when required to meet a shortfall. The performance review would not look to slash spending but would identify inefficiencies and steer funds into the most productive areas. Examples of performance reviews and associated savings:

- **The Texas School Performance Review** examines the management and fiscal performance of each school district. The review addresses all levels of management from the highest levels of district operations to transportation and food services for each school.
- **Performance Reviews in Florida** are conducted by private consulting firms with input from school districts to develop the scope of review. In 1998, a performance review of Glades County S.D. identified \$60,000 that the district could save by reducing its bus fleet. The district was advised to reduce its spare buses from 31% of the total fleet to 10-15%, the ratio more typical of school bus fleets. (Glades County

S.D. has around 1,220 students.)

Performance reviews found that Clay County S.D and Orange County S.D. could save \$1.7 million and \$15.2 million respectively by improving their identification of students eligible for Medicaid reimbursement and then collecting the funding. (Clay County S.D. has around 31,700 students; Orange County S.D., around 171,700.)

## Operations and Maintenance

### **Integrating energy-efficiency and conservation into operations and**

**maintenance.** The District should ensure that conservation and energy-efficiency are pursued in all aspects of operations and maintenance. For example, The Department of Energy publication *Best Practices for Controlling Energy Costs* describes how to plan, develop and implement an energy-efficient O&M program. The guidelines include low-cost strategies that cover all aspects of a building's energy consumption, including lighting, computer and office equipment, building envelope, water heating, kitchen equipment and procedures, swimming pools, vending machines, and portable classrooms.

Large savings from conservation measures can be found in unexpected places:

- **Lighting.** Broward County S.D., Florida, replaced the 40-watt incandescent light bulbs in exit signs with 3-watt LED bulbs. The district saves \$22.68 per bulb each year, resulting in a total annual savings of \$100,000. (Broward County S.D. has 270 schools.)
- **Water Conservation.** The Seattle School District saved \$200,000 by fixing leaky toilets and turning down the flow of water to urinals. The tanks behind the urinals now refill every 15 minutes instead of every two to three. Faucets are turned off completely when the schools are closed. (Seattle S.D. has 129 schools.)
- **Portable Classrooms.** State-of-the-art portables can be a source of extra energy costs instead of savings for school districts. A recent study in Washington compared a 1985 portable to a contemporary unit that exceeded current Washington State Energy Code Standards. The energy-efficient portable was found to use more energy than the 1985 model because it was not functioning as designed. Researchers gave a list of recommendations to ensure that portables function as efficiently as intended. These include installing thermostats that can be programmed on a 365-day basis and installing an air/vapor barrier in portables with T-bar dropped ceilings. (*Final Report: Northwest Portable Classroom Project.* Washington State University Extension Energy Program, 3.31.03.)

**Performance Contracting.** An in-depth energy audit of district buildings could determine where energy savings can be made and whether energy-saving measures will be cost-effective. Such thorough audits are expensive however. The district could therefore hire performance contractors to perform the audit and institute appropriate energy saving

measures for a percentage of the consequent savings. Certain measures increase the effectiveness of performance contracting:

- **Request for Qualifications:** The district states its goals and objectives for the contract; energy service companies respond with proposals detailing their capabilities; and the district selects the company best suited for the job. This method of selecting a performance contractor ensures that a thorough audit will be performed. Since the company is assured of the contract before performing the audit, it is able to commit the time and resources necessary for a detailed and accurate audit.
- **Conservation measures instituted:** Having performed the energy audit, the energy service company will select appropriate energy conservation measures and determine their costs and expected savings. A well-designed and installed energy-conservation project typically should generate lower utility bills and repair costs and reduce staffing needs.
- **School District Staff receive training:** Staff receive training in maintaining and monitoring the new equipment and systems. This will ensure that equipment and systems continue to run as designed and will reduce the need for costly maintenance contracts with the energy service company.

**Conservation Programs in the Schools.** The Rochester School District has had success in lowering electricity costs by instituting a Green Schools Program at two elementary schools. A similar Green Schools Program could be implemented in Tacoma elementary, middle, and high schools. For example:

- **Oregon Green Schools Program.** This program is currently in use around the country. Schools are rated in six areas, including waste reduction and recycling and community involvement (schools can choose which areas to focus on). Besides encouraging conservation, the program becomes a valuable part of the school curriculum. Students are involved in hands-on learning and get to practice the life skills taught in class.  
Staff at City of Tacoma Solid Waste Management have offered to provide technical assistance to schools wanting to institute the program.
- **Potential Savings:** Since 1993, Harold Oliver Primary in Portland, Oregon, has generated average yearly savings of \$3,428 from waste reduction and energy conservation; Lynch Wood Elementary in Portland, Oregon, has generated \$2,613 average yearly savings.
- **Waste Reduction.** A composting program alone could generate substantial savings. In the spring of 2003, Cascadia Consulting Group analyzed the solid waste from two Tacoma elementary schools, Sheridan and Lister (with enrollments of 597 and 521 students respectively). Over four weeks, Sheridan generated 521 lbs. of waste daily; Lister generated 410 lbs daily. More than 80% of the waste by weight was compostable; more than 66.5% by volume was compostable. By instituting a composting program, a school could greatly reduce the costs of waste disposal.

**Offering Incentives to Reduce Energy Use and Solid Waste.** Regardless of the efficiency of building design, a large amount of energy is wasted because of individual behavior—lights are left on in empty rooms, personal appliances such as space heaters, coffee pots and even refrigerators, are brought into offices. It can be hard to encourage individuals to change their behavior—to turn off lights, leave the coffee pot at home, and stop fiddling with the thermostat—when the consequences of their actions are distant and unseen and change does not offer immediate benefits. To address this problem, school districts can provide incentives to encourage individuals to adopt conservation-responsible behavior. Rochester School District encouraged commitment to the green schools program by returning to the schools 50% of any savings generated by their staff and students.

- **Incentives for Cost-savings.** If a school instituted a recycling and composting program, Tacoma Solid Waste Management could calculate the savings by determining the change in the size of waste containers used by the school and the frequency of pick-up. The school district could then return a percentage of any savings to the school. Similarly, the district could return a portion of the savings that schools realize from conserving energy and reducing water use.

## **Cooperative Purchasing**

Sharing services and resources with neighboring districts can result in more bargaining power and lower prices.

- **Kenosha Unified School District No. 1 and Racine Unified School District,** two neighboring districts in Wisconsin, are finding that pursuing a partnership has yielded more buying and problem-solving power. They are jointly buying supplies, such as custodial supplies, and are sharing the cost for software used to schedule buses. They are now considering long term projects that will allow even greater cooperation.

## **Transportation**

Fuel costs may continue to fluctuate in the short term, but in the long term will continue to escalate. School districts are employing a variety of strategies to reduce transportation costs:

- **Reducing Bus-idling.** If an engine is within normal operating temperature, fuel consumption during engine start-up is equal to just 30 seconds of engine idling. Therefore, most New York State School Districts are attempting to reduce bus-idling time. To conserve fuel, North Allegheny School District closely monitors every bus to determine bus-idling time and acceleration from stops.
- **Reducing Costs of Bus Routes.** To increase the efficiency of bus routes, New York State School Districts are considering sharing bus routes with neighboring districts. North Allegheny School District monitors every bus route to ensure that it is running to capacity. School districts should also ensure that transportation policies are being followed and that program-eligibility is not abused.

- **Cooperative Purchasing.** School districts around Pittsburgh have the option of joining the Allegheny Intermediate Unit Fuel Consortium to purchase diesel and unleaded gas. In 2005, forty-four school districts banded together to buy four million gallons locked in at \$1.589 per gallon, down from \$1.592 per gallon the previous year.
- **Alternative Fuels.** Incorporating natural gas, biodiesel, or ethanol busses into the fleet, can reduce fuel costs as well as polluting emissions.
- **Rental vs. Reimbursement.** Peters School District near Pittsburgh is considering renting vehicles and buying gas to fuel them in place of employees using their own cars and receiving reimbursement for travel, such as to attend seminars.
- **Public transportation.** Older students can use public transportation rather than school busses.

## Cost-effective Ways to Utilize Surplus Space

School districts have begun to share space in their school buildings with educational, social service, and community organizations. This can be done solely for the purpose of gaining revenue from an otherwise underutilized asset. It can also be done with the set intention of partnering with other organizations.

### Leasing Space

Surplus space can be leased to community organizations, such as daycare senior care, or to compatible businesses and recreational organizations.

- **Mount Lebanon School District, Pennsylvania.** Faced with a declining enrollment, Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Mount Lebanon, found a compatible organization to lease its surplus space. This allowed the school to weather the lower enrollment and to remain open while waiting for student numbers to climb again. In Tacoma, a North End preschool with fifty students is currently looking for a new location and is interested in leasing surplus space in an elementary school from the Tacoma School District.
- **District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)** is using “rightsizing” in neighborhoods with declining student numbers. Surplus space will be used to house administrative offices, such as special education administration. Within the next few years, all administrative offices will be housed in the schools.

## Partnerships

Schools around the nation are entering into partnerships with organizations such as museums, nursery schools, day care centers, senior citizen programs, social service agencies and businesses. By sharing facilities with these organizations, the schools create broader learning opportunities for their students and are able to deliver higher quality services to students and their families.

- **District of Columbia Public Schools** are using the decrease in student numbers as an opportunity for new approaches to schooling. The district plans to partner with both private and public organizations—such as healthcare agencies, charter schools, or public libraries—that can be housed alongside a school in the school building. The partnership is intended to reinforce the educational curriculum or to assist with neighborhood services.
- **Cincinnati School District.** Beginning in the 1990s, the school district has partnered with the social services agency FamiliesFORWARD, a United Way–funded organization dedicated to child protective services. In 1993, the agency decided it could have a much greater impact if it focused on prevention rather than intervention. Agency staff saw school-based programs as the ideal method for reaching out directly to children and their parents. As a result, the agency collaborated with the district to design programs for target schools. These have greatly enhanced the effectiveness of both the schools and the agency. In return for space in the schools, the agency now provides from \$200,000 to \$250,000 worth of services to each school.

The Parham School. FamiliesFORWARD collaborated with the school district to redesign the Parham School, an elementary school that was failing and threatened with closure. The school now provides space to agency staff, who work with families and students. The staff also hire teachers for after school programs, including ballet, homework clubs, choir, social skills; the teachers, in turn, gain skills in violence prevention. Through one program, “Gifts We Share,” students pen-pal with senior citizens and volunteer their time for them. The seniors come to read to the students and share neighborhood history. According to a staff member at FamiliesFORWARD, the seniors have a great relationship with the children and help provide social modeling.

As one measure of success, student test scores have greatly improved. The number of fourth grade students passing state writing, reading, math, and science tests has doubled. The number of sixth grade students passing reading, science, math, and citizenship has doubled.

Withrow University High School. In 2002, FamiliesFORWARD collaborated with the school district to open Withrow University High School. The objective was to address the city’s low graduation rates. This year the school is expecting a 90% graduation rate; the district average is 50%.

Through its partnership with the school district, the social service agency is better able to fulfill its mission, and students gain the skills they need to succeed at school. In return for

providing space, the school district receives immediate savings in the form of reduced staffing needs. It also receives valuable long term savings due to improved student achievement and graduation rates.

Tacoma shares with Cincinnati several of the characteristics that have fostered FamiliesFORWARD's success. As in Cincinnati, Tacoma's elementary schools are embedded in neighborhoods, allowing the schools to serve as a hub from which to reach out to families. There are also numerous programs in Tacoma, such as the United Way-funded STEPS program, that work with at-risk youth and students.

## Section B: Costs of Consolidation

The following section lists our concerns over consolidation. Firstly, we believe that the current consolidation process lacks community buy-in and consequently threatens to diminish support for the schools. If consolidation is pursued, then the process should be reformulated: It should be transparent; it should be perceived as fair; and it should be steered by clearly communicated guiding principles.

As important, if school closure is pursued, we would like assurance that all the actual and hidden costs of school closure have been evaluated and have been weighed against the benefits.

### Loss of Community Support

Closing a school is never easy. However, Tacoma's consolidation process unfolded very rapidly and with little opportunity for the district to address the community's concerns. Unfortunately, negative perceptions remain uncorrected: the process is not seen as transparent; the choice of criteria is seen as too narrow; and the committee is perceived as unrepresentative. All of this hampers community buy-in for the process and threatens the district with a loss of public support.

Our aim is not to hurl criticism at the consolidation process, but to outline some of the public's main concerns with the process so that these can be addressed:

#### **The Consolidation Committee**

The committee is not perceived as representative. Many community members did not know the committee was being assembled. Few people saw the notice in the *News Tribune*. And the statement in the January *Spotlight*, "The district will form a committee of community members and district staff" did not read as an invitation to volunteer. Some schools had no representatives while others were extremely well represented. Unfortunately, despite the committee's hard work and commitment, the lopsided make-up of the committee has created a public perception of bias. In any event, the committee has now fulfilled its mission and a new committee should be formed.

#### **The Criteria**

**The criteria are not broad enough:** The criteria evaluate a school solely on its practical ability to house students—its building condition, capacity, location, and size of grounds. There is no assessment of its actual value as a school—a place that educates children effectively, engages the community, and involves families as enthusiastic partners in education. Perhaps these characteristics were thought to unfairly advantage schools in more affluent communities. However, the selection process appears unreasonable when it puts no emphasis on a school's educational achievements and disregards a school's success in fulfilling the Tacoma School

District's own goals: increasing student achievement, increasing parent involvement, and improving student attendance.

Alternatives: Other districts undergoing consolidation have included broader criteria. Consolidation is never a happy process, but at least these districts start out with criteria that encourage community acceptance. For example, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), the Seattle Public Schools (SPS), and the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) have included the educational and community value of a school. The DCPS criteria include "education value" and "schools as centers of the community." The SPS criteria include, "Effective instruction addressing the needs of all students," and "Impact on market share/satisfaction." The MPS criteria included a school's educational performance and its ability to attract and retain students.

**The criteria are not consistent.** The criteria have appeared to shift. For example, the January 2006 *Spotlight* stated the district "will look at all elementary schools with enrollments of 325 or fewer students." While there are several schools with enrollments under 325, the top two schools currently recommended for consolidation both have enrollments above 325.

**The process for applying the criteria is unclear.** It is unclear how a school's scores for the various criteria were totaled to create a final score. Were the different criteria weighted or were they treated as being of equal importance? For example, did a high score in "non-zone enrollment" count for as much as a high score in "low acreage" and vice versa?

**The criteria appear selective.** For example, if the need to meet a budget shortfall is driving consolidation, then it is surprising that a school's operating costs are not included in the criteria.

### **Lack of guiding principles for consolidation**

Although the District has stated that consolidation will save money, it has not described how consolidation fits into a broader vision for the schools. And it is not clear what objectives are guiding the current consolidation process. The public is left with the apprehension that the district may use school closure as an ongoing strategy for cutting costs.

Alternatives: A set of guiding principles would help communicate the district's goals. Both the DCPS and the SPS have publicized guiding principles that steer the consolidation process and the choice of criteria. The SPS general principles include "Sustain and create academic effectiveness," "Be able to demonstrate benefits of change to students and families," "Minimize disruption to students, families, and staff." For the DCPS, guiding principles include "All elementary children have access to excellent education within reasonable and safe walking distance," "decisions are transparent, the

stakeholders will understand the underlying assumptions and benefits,” “The Board will involve stakeholders in development and review of criteria.”

In Tacoma, the current consolidation process has had a perplexing result: Two flourishing schools with student enrollment above 325 have been selected as the top recommendations for closure.

## Possible increase in size of schools

Declining student population is given as one of the main justifications for closing a school. However, there is conflicting information concerning the growth rate of the student population. And if numbers are not declining, will school closures result in fewer schools, each with steadily increasing enrollments?

**Student Population Trends.** Population information on the website presents contradictory information. Several graphs show a continuing decline in student enrollment in the Tacoma School District. On the other hand, a table titled “Trends in K-12 Student Population by Consolidated Forecast Analysis Zone” shows the opposite trend. Although student population declined from 1997 to 2000 in the South End, West End, North End, and Central/New Tacoma, each of these zones is projected to see increases from 2000 onwards, reaching or surpassing 1997 levels by 2010.

**Preschool Enrollments.** The North End is thought to be experiencing the most severe declines in student population. However, phone calls to several North End preschools suggest that enrollment in the elementary schools will be holding steady or increasing. Each of the preschools contacted said that they were seeing steady or increasing enrollment or that available spaces had been filling up more quickly during the past few years (North Tacoma Montessori Center, L&L Learning Center, Arcadia Montessori, Jack and Jill Co-op, Skyline Montessori).

**Neighborhood Survey.** Of the neighborhoods surrounding schools on the closure list, those around Grant and Washington-Hoyt Elementary Schools are expected to have the smallest gains in student population (“Comparison of Priority Schools on Consolidation Considerations”). However, a door-to-door survey of homes in a nine-block area south of Washington-Hoyt found that families with young children are choosing to locate in this neighborhood. Households in the neighborhood currently represent a mix of age groups from young families to the elderly. As houses have changed hands during the last five years, there has actually been a net increase in the number of families with young and preschool-age children. (Thirteen houses were identified as having changed hands. Of these, five of the former households included children; six included no children; the remaining two are unknown. Of the replacement households, seven include children aged five or younger; four include children aged five to ten; two include children in middle school or high school.)

## Direct and Hidden Costs

The publicized benefit of closing a Tacoma elementary school is given as a savings of \$396,000 to \$643,000. However, school districts have found that the expenses associated with consolidation, such as transportation costs, salaries, and operating expenses, can offset the expected savings. Closure can also entail hidden costs.

### Direct Costs

**Staffing Costs.** According to the District website, the potential savings associated with elementary school consolidations will come from cutting support staff positions.

However, it seems likely that extra staff support will be required in the receiving schools. For example, when a receiving school absorbs 200 or even 300 students from a closing school, and its enrollment rises from 200 to 400 or 500, extra staff will be needed in the office. Grant and Downing with enrollments of around 330 and 300 students respectively each have a principal and an office coordinator. Edison, with an enrollment of around 550 has a principal, an office coordinator, an administrative assistant, an education assistant, and a secretary.

**Maintenance and Operating Costs.** While closing a school could cut energy and maintenance costs, there will be an offsetting increase in maintenance costs and wear-and-tear in the receiving schools. It also seems likely that an empty building will incur damage if kept unheated over a damp Pacific Northwest winter. And an empty building may risk security problems and vandalism if left unlit at night.

**Transportation Costs.** Many of the students attending schools on the consolidation list live less than a mile from their school. After consolidation, these students' primary school of attendance is quite likely to be more than one radius mile from their home. They will therefore be eligible for transportation on school buses, resulting in new costs to the school district.

### Costs to the Community.

**Loss of a community resource.** Closing a school will have an impact on the surrounding community. According to one study, "After a school closure, out migration, population decline, and neighborhood deterioration are set in motion, and support for public education diminishes" (Rodolfo Rincones, *Exploring Alternatives to Consolidation*, ERIC, 1988). Nothing so dire will happen in Tacoma where the school is not the only neighborhood resource. Nonetheless, an adverse impact is to be expected in neighborhoods where the school is an integral part of the community, attracting families to settle there and supporting businesses and community organizations.

**Reduction in property values.** Good schools are, literally, a valuable asset to their neighborhoods, with a robust impact on property values. This has been vividly illustrated in Florida, which has started issuing a report card for schools. Schools awarded an "A" grade have boosted the price of median-sized homes in their surrounding

neighborhood by more than 7% over schools awarded a “B” grade. For larger homes, the increase was 14% (David N. Figlio and Maurice E. Lucas, *What’s in a Grade: School Report Cards and House Prices* for the National Bureau of Economic Research, 2001). These grades may be somewhat arbitrary. Nevertheless they demonstrate the effect that schools can have on property values. It cannot be discounted that closing valued schools may impact the property values of the surrounding neighborhood. This is clearly a loss to the community and, ultimately, to the schools, since reduced property values translate into a reduced tax base for the school district.

### **Hidden Costs**

**Loss of students.** Schools are not just buildings. They are communities that are extremely important to the students, families and neighborhoods they serve. Whichever school is closed, there will be a reduction in support for the public schools. And whichever school is closed, some students and families will leave the Tacoma public school system.

Threatened with closure, one Tacoma school has conducted a survey of the effect closure could have on families enrolled in the school. Sixty four per cent of families responded. Of these, ten per cent said that they had come to the school from private schools, home schooling, or from out-of-district. At least 15% of the school’s families stated that, if the school should close, they would transfer out of the district (32% stated they would consider transferring).

### **Loss of educational options**

Research continues to show that there could be educational and social costs associated with losing smaller schools in favor of centralizing students and creating larger schools. A host of benefits, such as higher academic achievement, improved attendance, greater participation in school activities, a greater sense of community, and higher graduation rates, are associated with smaller schools. The beneficial effects of smaller schools are seen most especially for low-income students.

In other words, small schools could be an important tool in meeting Tacoma’s needs. And, at around \$500,000 apiece, they would seem a bargain. Tacoma at the elementary school level is already blessed with small schools, scattered throughout its neighborhoods. These should be supported and viewed as an asset rather than an extravagant luxury. Once a school is closed and its community scattered, it cannot be pieced back together again. Closure is irreversible. It would be unfortunate if this step were taken without at least discussing the value of small schools and the role they could play in the district’s future.

# Section C: The Benefits of Small Schools

In this section, we offer a brief review of small schools research and discuss the implications for Tacoma.

A wealth of research over the past decade has pointed to the value of small schools, especially for disadvantaged students. When compared to large schools, small schools often show superior results in a range of areas, including academic achievement, student behavior, teacher satisfaction and community involvement. Interestingly, small schools are very positively associated with the goals of the Tacoma School District: increasing student achievement, increasing parent involvement, and improving student attendance.

We are concerned that the current drive to close a school has not addressed the different social and educational outcomes that could result from promoting larger rather than smaller schools. At present, Tacoma's pattern of small elementary schools scattered throughout neighborhoods offers educational options that will be narrowed with each school closing. We would like to ensure that these options have been fully explored before school closures shut the door to them.

## Small Schools and Achievement

A quantity of research over the last twenty years has concluded that students perform better in smaller schools.<sup>1</sup> Students in smaller schools tend to have higher attendance rates, lower dropout rates and higher achievement. According to the Report Card on American Education, schools with fewer than 300 students showed the best performance, even when a school's class size was higher than the national average. In Chicago the public school system intentionally established 150 small schools between 1990 and 1997. The elementary schools serve fewer than 350 students, the high schools fewer than 400. A recent study found that, compared to students in the larger schools, students in Chicago's small schools have better attendance rates, have a dropout rate that is a third to a half that of students in larger schools, pass more courses, and have higher GPAs.

## Small Schools and Economically Disadvantaged Students

The findings of small school research are particularly striking concerning the effect of school size on economically disadvantaged students. It is impoverished students who show the clearest gains in achievement as school size decreases. Researchers for the Matthew Project

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<sup>1</sup> While many researchers advocate for small schools, the ideal size has not been definitively established. In reviewing the research, Cotton finds that the effective size for an elementary school ranges from 300 to 400 students, for secondary schools, 400 to 800 students. Other researchers state that 150 students is the ideal number for an elementary school, while 600 to 900 students is most effective for a secondary school. Optimal size for a school probably depends upon the students served by the school and its specific goals. The important consideration is that school size, like class size, is a contributing factor to the effectiveness of a school.

analyzed the test scores of students from schools in Georgia, Ohio, Montana, and Texas. They found that in every grade tested smaller schools reduced the negative effect of poverty on average student achievement. Conversely, as schools became larger, the negative effects of poverty on achievement increased. The correlation between poverty and low achievement was up to 10 times stronger in the larger schools. Another study focusing on high schools found that the typically negative influence of poverty was sharply reduced in high schools with 300 students or fewer.

An open enrollment policy allows students of all backgrounds to obtain the advantages associated with smaller schools.

### **Small Schools and the Learning Environment**

The intimate environment of small schools fosters the conditions in which all students can succeed. The small size encourages a sense of community, enables students and teachers to get to know one another, and strengthens interpersonal relationships. Students are more likely to enjoy a sense of belonging and to feel that teachers are interested in them. Rates of parental involvement are also greater at smaller schools. In this more intimate community, where community members become well known to each other, it is easier for adults to give students the particular assistance and encouragement they need, and harder for students to fall through the cracks. A review of small schools research found that students have more positive attitudes about themselves and towards school.

Students in small schools are also encouraged to become well-rounded individuals. They are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities and in a greater variety of activities. The simple fact of being able to walk to their school encourages students to be involved in after-school activities and events. And since a smaller school needs to draw on the talents of all its members, students are more likely to hold important positions in the activities in which they are involved.

The sense of confidence that comes from belonging to a community and being involved in that community surely fosters a student's ability to succeed academically. As important, that sense of confidence will enable the student to become an active participant in society as an adult.

### **Small Schools and Discipline Problems**

The intimate environment of small schools is probably responsible for their lower rates of student violence and misbehavior when compared to larger schools. In small schools, students are inevitably known by their teachers and peers. Acting out decreases due to stronger personal bonds.

Small schools have far fewer problems with social disruption such as truancy, theft, gang participation, and aggressive behavior. Comparing schools with fewer than 300 students to

schools with more than 900 students, a US Department of Education study found much higher rates of crime and violence in the larger schools (3200% more robberies, 825% more violent crime, 270% more vandalism, 394% more physical fights). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “fighting and behavior problems get worse as schools grow larger.” In their overview of small Chicago schools, the researchers found that violence occurred with less frequency in the small schools. They state that the increased sense of identity and community found in smaller schools offers a remedy to the isolation and alienation—often associated with teen violence—that is found in very large schools.

### **Small Schools and Teachers Attitudes**

As important as positive student attitudes, and no doubt partly responsible for them, are the positive teacher attitudes found in smaller schools. Teachers in small schools generally report a greater sense of community than teachers in large schools and have more opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues. They also have more control over their work and feel more able to influence the direction of their school. When compared to teachers in large schools, teachers in the study of small Chicago schools were more likely to report feeling creative and recommitted to teaching; and they were more likely to report strong professional commitment and great job satisfaction.

In fact, superintendents in the Midwest reported that making schools smaller was the most effective action they could take to retain teachers. This undoubtedly has an impact on a school district’s costs to recruit and retain faculty and staff.

### **Small Schools and Cost-effectiveness**

A focus on educational outcomes is important, since this addresses the contention that small schools are a costly luxury. Since the ultimate purpose of a school system is to graduate students, then cost per graduate, rather than cost per student, is a fairer measure of a school’s cost-effectiveness. Researchers in Nebraska compared the graduation rates between schools in six different size categories. They found the likelihood that a student will complete high school and enroll in college to be 25% higher for counties with the smallest schools compared with counties with the largest. High schools of 300 to 599 students had the lowest annual expenditure per pupil likely to graduate—\$5,790 compared to \$6,396 per pupil for schools over 1,000. Similarly, a study of New York high schools found that the total cost per graduate was no more than that at a large school: a total of \$49,553 per graduate for schools under 600; \$49,578 for schools over 2,000.

### **Small Schools and Innovation**

Many of the conditions that lead to successful outcomes for small schools are inherent in the schools’ size. It is their small size that fosters the sense of community, the students’ feeling

of belonging, and the strong student-teacher relationships. Teachers are more able to tailor programs to meet students' needs and respond to individual learning styles.

Their size and relative lack of bureaucracy also allows small schools to be flexible and institute change. They can thus foster innovation. One study examined twenty small schools around the country that are forging new approaches to education (the elementary schools enroll fewer than 400, the high schools fewer than 600). Many of the schools are sharing space with other compatible organizations such as museums, nursery schools, day care centers, senior citizen programs, and businesses. The researchers report that, by sharing facilities with other organizations, schools can create broader learning opportunities and higher quality services to students and their families. Many of the schools in the study have a higher percentage of minority, lower income and highly at-risk students than is the average for their school district. However, these schools also all enjoy higher achievement scores, higher graduation rates and higher student retention.

Size alone is not sufficient for small schools to fulfill their potential. The most effective small schools have a high degree of autonomy and teachers are encouraged to use their skills and experience to help students succeed. The schools have a strong sense of identity, which is reinforced by the physical structure of the school. When small schools are carved out from larger facilities they must each be given a clearly defined and separate space.

The most successful schools also have a clear focus that attracts students and teachers with a shared interest and gives a sense of shared purpose. Such schools may, for example, focus on Asian cultures, the arts, science, or technology; or they may teach students by using Montessori methods or inquiry-based learning or by integrating community services into the curriculum.

### **Small Schools and Tacoma**

Unlike many school districts, Tacoma's elementary schools already enjoy many of the conditions that help small schools succeed. Many of the city's neighborhood schools are already small and do not have to be created from existing large facilities. Their location in neighborhoods encourages community involvement and partnerships with community organizations. As in Cincinnati, where schools have seen such success in partnering with FamiliesFORWARD, Tacoma has elementary schools that can serve as a hub from which to reach out to families. Furthermore, although small schools can lack diversity, Tacoma already has in place an open enrollment policy that allows a school to draw students from across the city.

Tacoma has already seen great success with its small schools. Schools such as SOTA and Bryant possess exactly those characteristics that cause a small school to flourish: Beside their small enrollments, they have been given an educational focus, and enjoy a tight-knit community of teachers, students and parents with a shared sense of purpose.

The benefits that small schools provide to low-income students could be particularly significant for Tacoma, which faces greater challenges than the neighboring school districts to which it is often compared. About 42% of Seattle's students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and 39.6% of Federal Way's students. Yet almost 53% of Tacoma's students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Many of Tacoma's students are the disadvantaged students who benefit in particular from smaller schools. Smaller schools could provide the close student-teacher relationships, the range of programs and teaching-styles, and the innovative partnerships with community organizations that could help students who currently do not succeed in the school system.

Small enrollment numbers alone are not enough to ensure that a school fulfills its potential. Nor is "smallness" the single magic answer to our community's educational challenges. However, the small size of a school does seem to be one important factor in ensuring student success. It also allows for the creativity and innovation that are needed to reach underserved students.

The current drive to consolidation and closure seems to discount or overlook the value of small schools. But small schools are not a liability; they are an opportunity. Rather than being closed to save funds, we would like to see our individual small schools considered for their potential and regarded as valuable assets.

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