

DOES SCHOOL SIZE MATTER IN SCHOOL QUALITY?

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The size of the school and its influence on academic performance have been extensively researched in recent years. Teachers perceive that the size of the class as well as school has significant influence on academic performance by students.

Research studies reveal both positive and negative effects of school size on performance of students. Howley (1994) reports evidence that students in high socio-economic status communities perform better in larger schools. Small size seems to benefit minority and low-income students more than the middle and upper-class students, say Valerie E. Lee and Julia B. Smith (1996).

Michael Klonsky (1995), Mary Anne Raywid (1995), and others report that large school size obstructs attendance and dampens enthusiasm for involvement in school activities. Large schools have lower performance by students.

Large schools need more decentralised administration to handle the increased bureaucratic demands. Fowler and others found that although large schools offer greater curricular variety, only a small percentage of students take advantage of advanced and alternative classes.

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Large schools offer more specialised programs for disadvantaged and disabled youth, but students in these programs are more likely to feel cut off from the school culture. In fact, in large schools, social stratification is the norm. (Deborah Meier, 1995). Large schools function more like bureaucracies; small schools, more like communities.

A higher percentage of students, across all socioeconomic levels, are successful when they are part of smaller, more intimate learning communities. Girls, students with special needs, the gifted, the exceptional, or the disadvantaged, are all better served by small schools. Small school size encourages teachers to innovate and students to participate, resulting in greater commitment from both groups. More positive attitudes and greater satisfaction are reflected in higher grades and performance scores, improved attendance rates, and lowered dropout rates.

Deborah Meier (1996) cites seven reasons why schools of 300 to 400 students work best:

1. Governance - Communication is easier when the whole staff can meet around one common table.
2. Respect - Students and teachers get to know each other well.
3. Simplicity - Less bureaucracy makes it easier to individualise.
4. Security - Students have a sense of belongingness and teachers can respond quickly to security and safety needs of students.
5. Parent Involvement - Parents get to know teachers who know their child and care about his or her progress.
6. Accountability - Everyone knows as to how a student, a teacher, or the school is doing.
7. Belongingness - Each and every student, not just the intelligent or creative or gifted children or students, is part of the school system.

Meier, Raywid, and others agree that small schools have the best chance at success when they are permitted to become separate, autonomous, distinctive entities with a well-defined system. Other factors influencing success include curricula developed around a theme or focus, tendency toward participatory management and governance, voluntary participation of teachers and students, and established linkages with organisations and agencies outside the school.

Fowler, Howley, and others suggest 400 students as the optimal size. Meier defines small schools as enrolling 300 to 400 students. Lee and Smith conclude that high school students learn best when enrollment is between 600 and 900. A joint policy statement issued by the Carnegie Foundation and the National Association of Secondary School Principals recommend that high schools break into units of no more than 600 students.

No one recommends fewer than 300 or more than 900 students. Howley (1996) suggests that "the most suitable size is likely to vary from place to place", with a community's relative poverty or affluence being a major factor. Small schools clearly provide an achievement advantage for impoverished students, while affluent students may fare better in larger schools.

Putting several small schools into an existing large school building can rejuvenate the school and enhance educational possibilities. Raywid and Meier report that doing so has typically resulted in great benefits for students, teachers, parents, and the entire school community. Many school managers have already instituted major restructuring efforts aimed at housing small schools in existing large buildings. Many see schools-within-schools as a crucial first step in restructuring, states Raywid. But, she notes that when creating new schools, it is important to resist grouping students by ability or achievement. Divisiveness and conflicts are also minimised if all the schools in the building are small schools, rather than one small school sharing space with a mainstream large school. Schools that transitioned most successfully have been based on the principles of cohesion, autonomy, focus or theme, and a constituency assembled on the basis of shared interests. While the reasons for downsizing failures are still sketchy, reports usually cite one of three shortcomings: insufficient faithfulness to the small-school concept, insufficient autonomy and separateness, or failure to couple changes in the school culture with the structural changes.

Research synthesis on Perceptions of Teachers About School Size reveals the following:

Primary school teachers opine that the class size should be small with twenty to twenty five students. The advantages of such classes as expressed by them are that the children could be managed with ease as well as activities could be organised suited to learner's needs.

Secondary school teachers feel that the class size has a vital role to play in teaching-learning processes. As subject specialisation begins at the secondary stage, science and mathematics teachers feel that smaller the class size, greater is the attention paid to students and imparting of special skills becomes easier. Those teaching Social Studies or Humanities feel that the class size could be around 45-50. This size is needed to enable group activities as well as project work. On the other hand, teachers handling languages feel that class size should be medium so that discipline could be maintained.

With regard to the impact of school size on student's academic performance, teachers feel that the academic performance would be better if the number of students and number of sections in specific classes and schools is less. So also, the school size has greater influence on curricular and co-curricular activities. This in turn improves the performance of students.