

The Ultimate Education Reform? Make Schools Smaller

By William Ayers, Gerald Bracey, and Greg Smith

In 1957 the Soviet Union shot Sputnik, the first man-made satellite, into orbit around the earth, and with it sent soaring American anxieties about the quality of education. The nation responded with calls to train more engineers and increase defense spending. One less-noticed reaction was to consolidate schools, especially high schools, into ever larger complexes.

Franklin Keller had recommended such consolidation in his 1955 book, *The Comprehensive High School*. James Bryant Conant picked up the call for comprehensive high schools in his study of high schools. Armed with these reports, policy makers such as Admiral Hyman Rickover stumped the nation, assuring us that comprehensive high schools could provide the professionals the country we needed to stave off the Communist threat.

What we've learned from the 40-year experiment, however, is that while large high schools may offer a more diverse curriculum and more years of foreign language, math and science, they have their own set of negative consequences. There is growing interest in returning to small schools and mounting research that small schools function better than big ones.

In large schools, both teachers and students move about the building in anonymity. In a small school, students can be known well. And to be known and acknowledged by other human beings is essential to human psychological well-being and to learning.

There's sound evidence for the quality that small schools offer. A growing body of research shows that small schools can:

- ✓ Raise student achievement, especially for minority and low-income students.
- ✓ Reduce incidents of violence and disruptive behavior.
- ✓ Combat anonymity and isolation and, conversely, increase the sense of belonging.
- ✓ Reduce graffiti on school buildings.
- ✓ Increase attendance and graduation rates.
- ✓ Elevate teacher satisfaction.
- ✓ Improve school climate.
- ✓ Operate cost-effectively.
- ✓ Increase parent and community involvement.

The Columbine massacre has focused attention on the alienation of students, but the typical reaction has been to militarize the schools with more police in the buildings, more metal detectors, video cameras, and "zero tolerance" policies.

Yet these approaches may backfire because they increase the expectation that violence will happen. In small schools, by contrast, students fight less, feel safer, come to school more frequently and report being more attached to their school.

Small schools are usually defined as those containing 300 to 400 students in elementary schools and 400 to 800 at the secondary level. But replacing our large schools with small ones doesn't mean we have to demolish the larger buildings wholesale. A school *building* is not the same thing as a school. We can carve up large school buildings into smaller areas that become separate schools. At the same time, we can preserve some of the advantages of large schools, such as they are, by treating the divided school as a single entity for activities such as band or athletics.

Dividing a large school into small ones also offers an increase in parental choice without the use of vouchers. If a former large school contains, say, four smaller ones, parents can

match the program offerings with what they think is best for their child. This can also heighten parent involvement with the school.

No education reform is a panacea. Small schools are more vulnerable to changes in teachers or principals simply because they are small. But in an era when some advocate turning public school dollars over to private schools, it's worth noting that the elite private schools are mostly small ones, averaging fewer than 300 pupils. Even larger ones have ways of reconstituting themselves as smaller units. In private schools, "teachers are responsible for far fewer students," says Arthur Powell formerly of the National Association of Independent Schools, who calls that "one of the most telling statistics in American education."

"Smallness is a prerequisite for the climate of and culture that we need to develop the habits of heart and mind essential to a democracy," Deborah Meier, principal of Seven Hills School in Boston once said.

"Small schools come as close to being a panacea for America's educational ills as we're likely to get."