

SCHOOL DISTRICT ORGANIZATION

School districts in California are organized according to a pattern of elementary districts, high school districts or unified districts. Elementary districts may be grades K-6 or K-8. High school districts are grades 7-12 or 9-12. Unified districts cover grades K-12.

Currently the state of California has 566 elementary districts, 96 high school districts, and 327 unified districts for a total of 969 districts. California also has 58 county offices of education.

In 1930, one-room schools made up almost 70 percent of the nation's schools. Between 1940 and 1990 the number of schools in the nation decreased from 200,000 to 62,000 schools in spite of a 70 percent increase in the U.S. population. Average size went from 127 to 653 students per school.

The movement toward consolidation and unification was driven by the work and thoughts of James Bryant Conant. His ideas were presented in the book, *The American High School Today* (1959). In the Cold War environment of the late 50s, they caught on and the consolidation and unification spread quickly. To a lesser extent it continues today with the building of large high school campuses.

California followed this consolidation and unification movement as its number of districts decreased from 1010 in the 1989-90 school year to 969 districts in the 2003-04 school year.

As consolidation and unification moved forward, the size of each school increased. Today the average size of an elementary school is 578 students. Within the state, size may vary from 10 to over 1000 students. High schools average 1647 students and may vary from 10 to over 5000 students.

Research on School Size

Over the last twenty years or so our nation has been asking about the achievement of our students and whether all students are receiving the same opportunities to learn. Researchers have begun to look at the issue of school size as an aspect of the achievement issue. LeFevre and Hederman (2001) found that school size, not classroom size, was the key to student performance. Schools with fewer than 300 students showed the best performance, even though class size was higher than national average (Report Card on American Education, 1994).

Additionally, several studies² in seven states (Alaska, California, Georgia, Montana, Ohio, Texas, and West Virginia) indicate that "smaller schools reduce the harmful effects of poverty on student achievement and help students from less affluent communities narrow the academic achievement gap between them and students from wealthier communities." Ohio University researchers did an analysis in Arkansas and found the following:

- The higher the level of poverty in a community served by a school, the more damage larger schools and school districts inflict on student achievement. In more affluent communities, the impact of school and district size is quite small, but the poorer the community, the stronger the influence.

² Bickel & Hawley, 2000; Hawley & Bickel, 1999; Friedlin & Neochea, 1988; Huang & Hawley, 1993

- The achievement gap between children from more affluent and those from less affluent communities is narrowed in smaller schools and smaller districts, and widened in larger schools and districts.
- Smaller schools are more effective against poverty when they are located in smaller districts; they are less effective when they are located in larger districts.
- Poverty dampens student achievement most in larger schools located in larger districts.
- The relationship between school size, poverty, and student achievement is as much as three times greater in schools with the largest percentage of African-American students.

Based on its research, the Report Card on American Education (2001) postulated that higher outcomes on standardized tests, such as the SAT and ACT, may be connected more with school size than with race.

Benefits of small schools have been noted in other research as well. Small schools are safer schools and better places for students to work with adults who know them and whom they trust. (Barher & Gump, 1964; Wesley, 2000; Cotton, 2001). Cotton (2001) goes on to say “there is less violence, less vandalism, a heightened sense of belonging and better attendance in small schools.” The U.S. Department of Education’s report, *Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools: 1996-97*, further supports these conclusions with the following statistics:

<p>Big schools (1000 or more) compared to small schools (less than 300) have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 825% more violent crime ■ 270% more vandalism ■ 378% more theft and larceny ■ 394% more physical fights or attacks ■ 3200% more robberies ■ 1000% more weapons incidents.
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Another area of consideration is graduation rates. Research shows that small schools graduate a higher percentage of students. Also more graduates go on to postsecondary education than from large secondary schools. In 1999 researchers reported that in Nebraska small schools outperformed larger schools in both the percentage of students graduating and the percentage going on to postsecondary education. Nebraska’s overall high school graduation rate was 85 percent. School districts with 600-999 high school students averaged only 80 percent of their students graduating. For high schools in districts with fewer than 100 students, the graduation rate averaged 97 percent.³

Researchers in both New York and Nebraska studied the annual cost per student and concluded that when such cost is figured on the basis of cost per graduate, small schools are a good financial and educational investment.⁴ This conclusion is further magnified when the social costs of dropouts are considered. The Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001, says dropouts are three and one-half times as likely as high school graduates to be arrested; 82 percent of inmates in the adult criminal justice system are dropouts.

³Funk & Bailey, 1999, p. 3

⁴ Steifel, et al., 1998

Superintendents of small schools cite benefits in the affective domain as keys to their success with students and parents. Small schools, they say, allow every child to be known and celebrated by the adults in the school, as well as in their community. They say the teachers, principal, and other adults at school are able to pick up on student struggles early and apply their collective expertise to give the child what he/she needs to continue learning and achieving. In this way students do not fall behind and develop negative feelings about school.

Small school superintendents also cite the community participation and ownership of their school as one of the advantages of a small school. Most of the parents help out in one way or another. This not only saves the school on outside expenses, but it also gives them community buy-in and pride in their school. They also say parents feel they have a say in their child's education. They know all the school board members and know how to contact them to have influence. To paraphrase an African saying: It becomes a village raising its children.

Large Schools and Small Learning Communities

Many large school districts are taking note of some of these advantages, while looking at ways their size provides opportunities for students.

The Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District has moved toward schools within a school at its Santa Monica High School (3,000 students). At the beginning of the school year in which the small learning communities (small schools) program was implemented, the high school was reconfigured into six smaller schools, or houses, that mirror the makeup of the large campus. Students spend the major portion of their day within their house with teachers and students who will stay with them for their four years in high school. The other part of the day is spent in elective classes according to their interests and talents. The philosophy is to give students the opportunity to be known and celebrated by the adults in their school, while having access to specialized classes that would not be possible in the smaller school.

Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond points to the pupil-teacher relationship as the important influence in preparing students for the job market. "It's not just getting through the book anymore, but teaching children to learn."

The movement toward schools within a school allows a reduction in class size and pupil load per teacher with the same amount of staff. This model, according to Darling-Hammond, could introduce "more serious in-depth learning focused on performance, with clear standards and opportunities for revision and redemption."

A similar effort is being undertaken in Oakland's public schools, using a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Oakland Unified School District spent a year working with Oakland Community Organizations and the Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools to define and work out their vision for New Small Autonomous Schools. This resulted in the "New Small Autonomous Schools District Policy" which defines every aspect from development of school design to how they will be evaluated and receive their funding. They are in the process of receiving proposals with the goal of opening in fall 2004.

Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond is also working with Hillsdale High School in San Mateo on schools-within-a-school reform. They are in the beginning stages of their effort and have many decisions yet to make. Their progress and efforts will be interesting to follow.

Inner city urban schools, suburban, and rural schools have found positive benefits in forming small schools within a large school building or using shared facilities with community groups.

In Queens, New York, four magnet schools were created out of a 2000 student inner city school that had all the classic urban problems. Frederick Douglass Academy in Harlem, New York City covers grades 6-12 and graduates 90 percent of its students within 4 years of their entering. They do not require good scores on tests to enter and have the motto, “Without struggle, there is no progress.” In 1990, the New York City Board of Education closed a large failing high school and reopened it with six small schools of choice. This is the famed Julia Richman Education Center.

Near the Loop in Chicago’s downtown area, Perspectives Charter School occupies a former furniture warehouse. Co-founded by veteran Chicago teachers, the school uses small size, high expectations, and extensive community involvement to graduate 83 percent of students who entered four years earlier. This compares with Chicago’s citywide average of 50 percent graduation.

Los Angeles Unified School District’s Vaughn Next Century Learning Center is in a high poverty, high crime and violence neighborhood. Vaughn is a shared facility with a medical clinic on campus, and it shares its library and classroom building with a higher education institution. This school ranks in the top 10 percent when compared with schools serving a similar group of students. It has also won the California Distinguished School award and been named a National Blue Ribbon School.

While economies of scale are cited as reasons for large schools, Bryk says, “the envisioned economies of scale here, however, are actually quite illusive. Moreover, whatever marginal efficiencies may be extracted is dwarfed by the overall ineffectiveness of these institutions. While school districts that are currently saddled with large physical plants might productively move toward schools within a school, there is little reason to continue to build more buildings like this. In light of the positive consequences for both adults and students associated with working small schools, the reality is one of a dis-economy of scale.”⁵

The decline in the number of secondary schools derived “from the belief that consolidating several small schools into one large school yielded economic and curricular benefits. Presumably large schools operated more efficiently than small schools and offered students a wider array of courses and programs. Finding convincing research to confirm these presumptions is somewhat difficult, however.”⁶

“School systems that want to reduce the negative impact of large schools have four basic options: (1) build small schools, (2) utilize satellite facilities, (3) reorganize and reallocate space, and (4) renovate and redesign existing schools.”⁷

In Linda Darling-Hammond’s work, she points to ten features of good small schools and small school environments. She says most of these features need to be present for the school to be successful:

- Personalization
- Continuous relationships
- High standards and performance-based assessment

⁵ Bryk, 1994, p. 6-7

⁶ Duke and Trautvetter, 2001

⁷ Duke and Trautvetter, 2001

- Authentic curriculum
- Adaptive pedagogy
- Multicultural and anti-racist teaching
- Knowledgeable and skilled teachers
- Collaborative planning and professional development
- Family and community connections
- Democratic decision-making.

Other Perspectives

This approach has its critics. Most say the movement is proceeding too quickly because of the foundation and federal money available to support creating the small school environments. They believe that most schools would not be embracing this effort if there were no money attached.

No one is criticizing the research showing that small schools have better results with children of color and those in poverty.

“It has to start at the school, and it has to involve the school community, because if Superintendent Romer (LA Unified School District) said, ‘OK everybody, we have to do this,’ it wouldn’t work,” said Rosa Maria Hernandez, the director for small communities in Los Angeles Unified School District Local District F, a sub-district of the 775,000 student district. “What we’re doing today is a disaster, particularly for low-income and minority kids,” said Tom Vander Ark of the Gates Foundation. “We need to come to grips with that.”

In October 2002, Valerie E. Lee and Douglas D. Ready from the University of Michigan and Kevin Weiner of the University of Colorado prepared a paper titled *Educational Equity and School Structure: School Size, School Overcrowding and Alternative Organizational Structure* for the Williams Watch Series at UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (IDEA). This was an interpretive summary of existing studies that included research on small schools and schools within schools. They admit, up front, that the quality of the research was uneven; not all studies had been subjected to peer review or had tight research designs or statistical controls. However, they say “we reviewed the work we were able to locate that concerns these topics.” For more information regarding any of the studies cited in the next two sections, go to the UCLA/IDEA Web site at <http://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/>.

Small Schools. In addressing small schools, this paper only considers high schools. They say “Although the ideal size for a high school has been debated since public secondary education began to expand about a century ago, this issue is currently the subject of intense discussion within the larger reform agenda. Most of these discussions advocate making high schools smaller than they are. However there is little research grounding the debate about the ideal school size.” (Page 2)

“Sociological research on school size suggest that small schools should have at least two advantages over large schools: relationships among school members and the schools offer a narrower curriculum (typically confined to academic courses).” But can a school be too small? (Pages 2-3)

“Research documents a relationship between organizational size and program specialization. In principle, larger schools have more students with similar needs, and thus are better able to create specialized programs to address these needs. In contrast, small schools must focus resources on core programs with marginal students (at either end of the ability or interest distribution) excluded from programs or absorbed

into programs that may not meet their needs as well (Monk, 1987; Monk & Haller, 1993).” (Page 4) In less academic terms, a larger school can offer more programs to meet the needs of students who have exceptional needs; for example, four years of more than one foreign language, advanced science and mathematics, specialized programs for underachieving students to help them meet their potential, or advanced programs in the fine arts for those students with exceptional talent. The reverse side is that in a small school where students are required to take the same academic core classes, there is less opportunity for “tracking” and all students are encouraged to meet common academic goals.

They also caution that “Reform is ahead of the research Much of what we see published about this topic feels more like advocacy than objective research.” They indicate that this may be money driving program, as many foundations (Gates, Annenberg, Carnegie) have provided funding for smaller high schools. (pages 6-9) While this has been getting a lot of recent attention, it is not a new idea. The ideal size of a high school was discussed by James Bryant Conant in 1959, John Goodland in 1984, TheodoreSizer also in 1984, and a Carnegie Foundation report in 1989. (Page 6)

Not all small school news is good. “Although without exception, teachers and students felt social relations were more personal in the smaller high schools, this was not always seen as a benefit. A few students in the smaller high schools reported that they were unable to ‘live down’ the negative reputations of their older siblings or parents. Some teachers in such schools had to work hard to keep a modicum of privacy.” In order to offer a wider curriculum, some teachers often taught out of their specializations. (Page 7) This concern has also been shared with the study committee in discussing the No Child Left Behind requirements with administrators from small schools and districts in California.

They also noted that not all small schools consider smallness to be an advantage. They “differentiated between schools that were ‘small by design’ and schools that were ‘small by default.’ Much of the enthusiasm for small schools focus on those small schools that *want* to be small, often have selective entrance criteria, and are staffed by innovative faculty and attended by committed students. However, the large majority of small U.S. high schools are ‘small by default,’ often in rural areas where populations are declining.” (Page 8)

Schools Within Schools. The concept of schools within schools (SWS), housing several small schools in one building or campus, is another alternative currently in favor. Lee et al. say “It is quite unlikely that taxpayers would support the construction of many small high schools and the abandonment of the buildings that now house large comprehensive high schools. In many locations with large public high schools, particularly inner cities, even maintaining *existing* schools is a financial challenge.” (Page 28)

Although this idea has received increasing interest over the past decade, it is not a new concept. Barker and Gump suggested a “campus model” in 1964 where “. . . students are grouped in semiautonomous units for most of their studies, but are usually provided a school-wide extracurricular program.” John Goodland advocated a similar structure in 1984.

The schools within schools model can have several meanings. The “full-model” is one where “all of the students and most of the faculty are members of one of several smaller instructional sub-units.” These may either report to one overall site administration or each may be truly independent and report only to the school district. (page 29)

A more common format is to have one or two small academies while most students remain in the regular high school. These are often career or interest based and have been studied by Stern, Raby and Dayton in

California. Another study of these programs was of the Coalition of Essential Schools programs conducted by Muncy and McQuillan (1996). They concluded “that implementing such a partial-model schools within schools structures was a poor idea because of the animosity that can develop between a ‘special’ sub-unit and the remainder of the school, mostly around differential resource allocation.”(page 30)

Lee et al. use the term sub-units for groupings that are often called houses or academies or blocks. These sub-units can be randomly assigned or organized around curricular, pedagogical, or career themes. Some organize special units around the youngest students, such as “freshman academies.” (Page 31) Some allow students to select their sub-unit to foster engagement and a sense of belonging, but the authors remind readers that “students’ social and academic backgrounds may be associated with their sub-unit choices. Some sub-units may also be designed to attract certain types of students, or may develop reputations that draw students with particular characteristics.” This can lead to “stratification and segregation.”

In summary they say “Our warnings regarding the potential of the SWS structure to segregate and stratify should in no way be read as an indictment of the reform. In several different areas, the SWS structure offers potential solutions to problems that have plagued comprehensive high schools for decades.”

What About Smaller School Districts?

While there is general agreement that smaller school environments, however they are provided, are best for students, there is not as much agreement on smaller school districts. Recommendation 29 of *The California Master Plan for Education* says “The State should take steps to bring all school districts into unified PreK-12 structures.” The reasoning cited is to better align and coordinate curriculum planning from the early years through high school. By encouraging this, school boards would focus on the entire educational experience of each student. They recommend developing “fiscal and governance incentives to promote local communities organizing their local schools into unified districts,” and eliminating “all fiscal and other disincentives to unification.”

The Small School Districts Association (SSDA) does not agree with this recommendation. In a workshop titled “Consolidation or Cooperation” presented at the California School Boards Association (CSBA) Annual Education Conference in December 2003, they stated that small districts allow the governance of the district to be closer to the people; in a one or two school elementary district, every parent can know a board member and there is better communication. They say that the needs of elementary and secondary students are different and that separate boards and administrations can better focus on these differing needs.

One speaker at that same conference, John Marshall, Director of Legislative services for the Oregon School Boards Association, talked of the Oregon experience. Legislation passed in 1991 mandated unification by September 1, 1996. As a result the 300 school districts in the 1989-90 school year has changed to 199 districts by the 2003-04 school year. There have been incentives for small high schools and encouragement of voluntary mergers, inter-district agreements and regional service delivery.

An article from the October 29, 2003 *Education Week* about the court-ordered consolidation in Arkansas was cited as another example. While Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee had first ruled to consolidate all districts with less than 1,500 students, the size has been lowered to all districts with less than 425 students. If that goal was not reached by July of this year, the districts would be dissolved and merged with one or more other districts. This is a part of a court order to rework the school funding system to provide more equity.

What the SSDA did recommend is more cooperation between and among small districts, working together or through the County Office of Education to consolidate non-classroom services for economy of scale. This can include business services, purchasing, transportation, curriculum assistance and food services. They see no difference in a central kitchen providing meals to seven or 10 schools in one district and providing the same service to a like number of schools in four or five districts. The Master Plan does not disagree with this. Recommendation 30 states “Local districts should, where appropriate, consolidate, disaggregate, or form networks to share operational aspects, to ensure that the educational needs of their students are effectively met and that their operational efficiency is maximized.”

All panelists at the conference, as well as the research consulted, agreed that there is no clear information on the optimal size range for a school district. The Master Plan recommends “a comprehensive study to determine the optimal size ranges for school districts with respect to both educational delivery and business operations.” SSDA asks that this study take into consideration geographical constraints and pupil density and that the breakup of large districts be considered along with the consolidation of small districts.

These discussions and considerations are both educational and political. There is a strong community pride in ownership of many of the small school districts. In recognition of this there was another workshop at the CSBA conference titled “Civil Wars: Maintaining Relationships and Quality Education During the Reorganization Process.” Presented by school law specialists from the Law Offices of Lozano, Smith, this workshop outlined the process for both consolidation of school districts and the breakup of larger districts, with their suggestions for involving parents and the community as well as the unions. There is currently no mandate or fiscal incentive to consolidate in California; however, this is an emerging issue to be aware of.