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COHESIVE COMMUNITIES, IMPROVED OUTCOMES: A CASE FOR SMALL SCHOOLS



DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS PAINT A SEEMINGLY BLEAK PICTURE for small schools. Declining school enrollments and school closures have led to an unprecedented trend towards school closures and amalgamation of schools across Canada. For example, in Ontario, 192 schools, have closed in the past decade, with 122 more closures pending. British Columbia has recently experienced 134 school closures.¹ Since student enrollment is the most common basis for funding formulas in Canada, small schools typically receive a smaller funding allocation than larger schools, thereby limiting budgets for staffing, curriculum development, programming and resources. Economies of scale suggest that a logical financial solution is to close small schools when student population drops below a sustainable level. Such closures, however, may be short sighted. Our own investigation of small schools suggests that Canada is beginning to lag behind in the educational debate over the long-term social impacts of small schools on student achievement, social cohesion and civic engagement and that small schools offer potential for longer-term benefits, which may offset short-term costs, if alternative policy decisions are enacted.

Debates about the social benefits of small schools have persisted for decades.² There is currently a revival of the "small school movement" of the 1960s, with educators, parents and teacher unions both in the US and Canada arguing that the scale of learning environment is important to the overall quality of the learning experience.

The birthplace of the small-school movement is the Chicago public-school system, so it is not surprising that much more information about this trend is found in the American literature. However, many issues are universal. Whether in independent small schools or small schools within large schools, reformers argue that small-school cultures promote social equity, narrower academic achievement gaps between socio-economically disadvantaged and affluent students, reduction in student drop-out rates and higher attendance levels, safer schools, student emotional stability and character development, and increased student, parent and community satisfaction.³ In essence, it is becoming increasingly clear that small schools provide educational benefits for students, which may justify a larger long-term social investment than current cost/benefit models used in educational planning allow.⁴ This raises questions of what to do about small schools: *Close them? Merge them? Or keep them?* Answers depend on how policy makers and communities value potential benefits, or critically assess so-called economies of scale in educational settings.

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HIGHER EDUCATION.**

DECLINING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Ultimately, the demographic downturn is forcing us to examine what we as a society view as quality education. In essence, the larger societal issue needs to be considered: *How are our schools preparing our youth for societal challenges in the name of civic engagement and democracy?* Without a significant presence in original research and development in assessing the policy implications of this debate, we argue that Canada is falling behind in understanding the impact of small schools on social cohesion, civic engagement and equitable life chances of successful entry into Canada's knowledge economy.

Sociologists widely accept that there is a decline in social interactions in our society. We are becoming increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our fundamental democratic structures as an anomic society develops. We're literally *bowling alone*, a term the American scholar, Robert Putnam uses to describe a phenomenon that includes reduced social networks, community and collaboration.⁵ When this happens, trust evaporates among people in communities and businesses, and even in schools.

One has only to read the daily paper to learn that the public shares these concerns as they relate to education, with stagnant graduation rates, declining youth engagement in the community (where 2 in 3 Canadians, 18 years of age, choose not to vote), issues around ESL, the capacity of local communities to absorb unprecedented levels of local immigration, the impending shortage of students eligible to enroll in colleges and universities, and the persistent drop-out rate. In fact, according to Statistics Canada, roughly 212,000 young people from a total population of 2.2 million in the 20-24 age group did *not* graduate from high school at the end of the 2004-2005 school year.⁶ The reasons for this vary and often include issues related to family and school environments. For example, abuse or neglect at home coupled with early academic failure may result in feelings of low self-esteem or stigmatization, leading to continued failure and ultimately to disengagement from school.⁷ School districts and policy-makers should be worried when four in ten dropouts cite school-related factors, including school policies upheld by teachers and principals that are counterproductive to keeping students in schools or allowing them to return.⁸ Many of these students report negative relationships with principals and teachers, a difficult and irrelevant curriculum, lack of tutorial support, lack of recognition of learning styles, and school climates that are not conducive for learning.⁹

We believe that small schools may very well hold the key to addressing some of these challenges. Scholars claim that schools are key in reinvesting 'social capital' within our

society, and this reinvestment is quite simply better in small schools. Small schools have an integral role to play in the very fabric of our social connections with each other. They show demonstrable benefits in the form of educational success rates and community engagement, benefits that must be factored in to any proposed school closure decision.

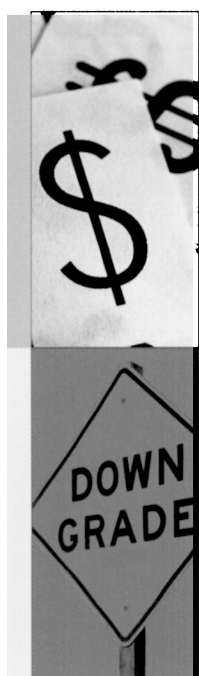
SMALL VS. LARGE SCHOOLS

In light of these findings, a growing body of research on small schools, both in Canada and in the US, finds that small schools do a better job at promoting educational attainment through a cohesive sense of community. This is probably true since they facilitate more intimate student relations with their schools and teachers, contributing to a participatory family-school environment.¹⁰ While large schools can provide more comprehensive instructional programs and resources, research indicates that students in small schools, including those labeled "at-risk", outperform those who attend large schools, and are more likely to graduate high school and proceed on to higher education. For example, students in small schools in Chicago's poorest neighborhoods attended up to five more days per semester than students in larger schools, dropped out at half the rate, had higher grade-point averages, and improved their reading scores by half a year.¹¹ Successes such as these are not unique to the United States. Haughey, Snart & da Costa studied the impact of small-class size on the achievement of Grade 1 students in ten, small, high-poverty, high-transient Edmonton public schools. The results revealed that 80% of the students' reading and writing improved, as did their behavior and attendance.¹² Data from a longitudinal study of mathematics in 34 Alberta high schools showed that Grade 10 students in smaller schools achieved higher levels of success than Grade 10 students in larger schools.¹³ While these illustrations are not exhaustive, they suggest real benefits of small schools that are rarely systematically entered into public discussions during school closure debates in Canada.

Large schools, by contrast, typically act as a more inflexible sorting mechanism for children, dividing learners according to their social status and cultural capital more than smaller schools.¹⁴ Working class and ethnic minority youth constitute the majority of students in large comprehensive schools, which often have the reputation for being the lowest achieving schools. Students from low socio-economic status families are often placed in lower academic tracks with less-experienced teachers and large classes. The good news is that many students unsuccessful in large schools are able to achieve parity with their peers after enrolling in small schools.¹⁵ Critical outcomes key to British Columbia's demographics, in particular, reveal that small schools are more successful at integrating new immigrants, accommodating special-educational needs, and providing better life chances for disadvantaged children, especially at the elementary level.¹⁶

DEBUNKING THE FUNDING MYTH

More importantly, perhaps, in light of the benefits of small schools, and the rationale for closing them, evidence reveals that small schools may actually be more cost efficient than is widely believed. In various studies of comparative operating costs, researchers have found that small



schools are actually *more* cost effective on a per capita student basis than larger schools. This bears out when completion rates are factored in, since graduation rates in small schools are typically higher.

To be sure, it is difficult to conclusively report that small schools are more cost effective than larger schools since reports treat operating and capital costs quite differently. However, a number of researchers underline the importance of the reduced costs associated with less frequent student discipline issues. As our own report indicates, violence, and even vandalism, is less frequent in small schools than in larger schools. When comparing the "cost per student" and "cost per graduate", small schools might cost more upfront if capital and other costs are considered. By contrast, however, large schools may incur larger expenses in the long run if negative factors are considered. A compelling argument can be made that funding a completed education is much more cost-effective than continually paying for the cost of 'recycling' student dropouts who must be continually re-integrated into the school system as a result of poverty, unwanted pregnancies, and crime.¹⁷ Therefore, we believe that, when examining the number of small schools across Canada that have already been closed or are slated to be closed, it is ethically incumbent upon school boards to take into account all the cost variables mentioned – social as well as monetary – including possible unintended costs such as the increase of busing and administrative mergers.

CONCLUSION

While it remains true that there is a growing social movement to accept the value of small schools, there is less agreement on how to monetize and mobilize the demonstrated social benefits. Despite the numerous benefits of small schools, advocates still remain cautious about the contribution they could make to remedy the systemic malaise in education policy. These are times that may require small, yet proactive, steps, which might involve piloting smaller-scale learner environments in larger existing settings. This might mean introducing learning communities, schools within schools, academies, or multi-age groupings to emulate a small school culture and measure

EN BREF La baisse des inscriptions et les fermetures d'écoles ont engendré une tendance sans précédent de fermetures et de fusions d'écoles au Canada. Les économies d'échelle motivent la solution financière logique de fermer les petites écoles où la population étudiante tombe en-deçà d'un niveau viable. Ces décisions pourraient toutefois être à courte vue. Des recherches indiquent que le Canada commence à tirer de l'arrière dans le débat portant sur les répercussions sociales à long terme qu'ont les petites écoles sur les réalisations scolaires, la cohésion sociale et l'engagement civique; elles indiquent aussi que les petites écoles comportent le potentiel de bénéfices à plus long terme, ce qui peut compenser les coûts à court terme. Même du point de vue financier, différentes études comparatives des coûts de fonctionnement constatent que les petites écoles sont, en fait, plus rentables sur une base de coût par élève que les plus grandes écoles.

their outcomes over time.¹⁸ Ultimately, keeping small schools open requires a re-visioning of funding formulae, staffing, scheduling, and curriculum development along with a commitment of the community, parents, students and district support. Concurrently, Canadians must ask difficult questions: *What kind of education do we want to make available for our youth so that they can contribute meaningfully to society and how can we communally do this? What impact will closing small schools have on future civic engagement, social cohesion and individual life opportunities?* Most educators are unable to adequately answer these questions. Without considering these or similar questions, their financial-feasibility models simply assume that the quality of education will not be at risk. From the data in North America that we have seen, we believe this claim is hollow. It is time to ask ourselves the following: *Why jeopardize our future citizens and social productivity by closing small schools based solely on myopic criteria?*

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Notes

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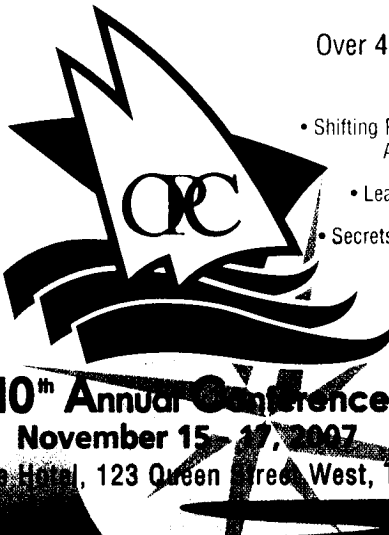
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