

Small Schools, Big Results

Is it possible for small schools to offer the comprehensive and rigorous curriculum experiences that might be available to students in larger settings? What are the consequences for students of having fewer curriculum options available to them?

Small Schools Work

Most of the research evidence about small schools (generally fewer than 300-400 students in grades 9-12) is overwhelmingly good. After an extensive review of research literature, conclusions from the Rural Schools and Community Trust are quoted below:

Small Schools Get Better Academic Results. Student achievement is higher in small schools, and even higher in small schools operating in small districts. Small schools also have much lower dropout rates and more graduates who go to college. Students from smaller schools do as well or better in college than those from larger schools. Small schools are particularly effective for students from low-income families and for students of color, helping to reduce the achievement gap.

Small Schools Promote Better Student Behavior. Schools with more than 1,000 students had far higher rates of violent student behavior than schools with fewer than 300 students, and small schools allow teachers to focus more on teaching and less on discipline.

Small Schools Have Higher Rates of Participation. Students who participate in activities at school have higher achievement, are less likely to drop out, have higher self-esteem, attend school more regularly, and have fewer behavior problems. Small schools create more opportunities for participation, so a larger percentage of students participate and they participate in more kinds of activities. For example, if 15 students are needed for a team, six small high schools will create 90 opportunities, while one large high school serving as many students would create only fifteen opportunities. And because small schools need a large percentage of students to fill each activity, they engage a broader cross-section of students, helping reduce social and racial isolation.



Small Schools Have Higher Levels of Parental Involvement, a critical factor in student success. Parents can be most involved if all their children attend one K-12 school instead of going to separate elementary, middle and high schools. In sparsely settled areas, a large school would have to cover a very large area, and travel time alone discourages many parents and students from participating in activities.

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Linda Darling-Hammond and her colleagues found similar results because of specific conditions that are easier to achieve in small school environments:

Personalization – the ability to adjust the school experience for individual students and families.

Continuous relationships – teacher-student and teacher-family relations that endure over many years.

High standards and performance-based assessment – fewer academic tracks and generally higher standards for all students.

Authentic curriculum – the ability to provide authentic, community based experiences because of the school's small scale.

Adaptive pedagogy – instructional adaptations can be negotiated at the individual teacher level, rather than going through a large bureaucracy.

Collaborative planning and professional development – because of small faculty size, collaboration is critical.

Family and community connections – family connections are more natural and are community-based.

Democratic decision-making – by their nature, smaller groups tend to use more consensus and democratic procedures.

The Rural Schools and Community Trust agrees. “Why do Small Schools Work So Well? In a small school, each student can be known and valued. No one gets lost in the crowd. All the adults in the school can know all the students. Small schools can be more flexible in response to individual students and their circumstances. Students have better attitudes when the school is personalized, when all can take part in activities, and when everyone knows their actions will be noticed.”



So, What’s the Problem? Or IS There a Problem?

Despite the generally strong performance of small schools in comparison to their larger counterparts, the pressure remains to expand curriculum offerings and “opportunity” for students in small, usually rural, environments. Typically, this means trying to expand services for special needs students, or extending the curriculum with advanced offerings for the most able students. But opportunity may not, in fact, translate into greater participation in these expanded offerings.

Christopher Roellke writes, “While certainly a laudable goal and an important measure of curriculum quality, curriculum breadth says little about the actual delivery of educational services to students and does not assess the extent to which students are actively participating in a high school’s instructional program. This discrepancy between the presence of curricular opportunities and the willingness or ability of students to take advantage of these opportunities is important to consider when gauging overall curriculum quality.”

What Does Matter?

Roellke cites a substantial body of research in offering three key ingredients for schools that have successfully restructured their curriculums:

A common academic curriculum. Student achievement gains were found in schools with a common academic curriculum, where course offerings are narrow and academic content is strong.

High levels of academic press. This curriculum expectation centers on the notion that all students will meet high academic standards and devote considerable effort to academic endeavors.

Authentic instruction. Students are engaged in sustained, disciplined, and critical thought through a variety of instructional approaches, such as independent study, project-based learning, and real-world problem solving.

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In-House Solutions

Researchers and scholars have found a number of “in-house” options that can be used to help expand curricular offerings without giving up the fundamental strengths of the small school environment. Roellke mentions several of these initiatives that have grown more popular, especially as technology has improved in the past decade:

An integrated or fused curriculum attempts to reduce the number of separate subjects through interdisciplinary courses. This "less is more" philosophy is consistent with the curriculum reform espoused by Ted Sizer and the Coalition of Essential Schools, and often involves scheduling students in longer blocks of time than the traditional 45- to 50-minute periods (Sizer, 1993).

Interdistrict pooling of instructional resources and the use of distance education and other technologies can serve to broaden educational opportunities for students in small schools. Collaboration and sharing among schools and school districts is particularly common in efforts to expand vocational and special services curricula. Advances in computer and video technologies have permitted many rural school districts to electronically import courses otherwise unavailable in the school system at a cost that is much lower than additional staff. Computerized learning programs, interactive television, and Internet access are additional resources that can enhance the curriculum of small high schools. Success has been reported in using these technologies to provide advanced placement and college credit courses as well as instructional services for students with special needs.

The Rural School and Community Trust offers a slightly more detailed response to the same question.

“Can a Small High School Offer a Full Curriculum? Yes. Small schools are able to concentrate on core curriculum and respond to individual student interests and needs. In addition, they can access a wide curriculum through interactive distance learning. In the most effective distance learning models, several schools collaborate to establish an interactive television network that allows a teacher in any of the schools to teach students in other schools on the network. Teaching is in real time, student-teacher ratio is equivalent to a regular classroom, and students and teachers interact as if they were located in the same room.”

“Schools can share specially certified teachers for low-demand courses. For example, one school may have a Spanish teacher and another a physics teacher; each teacher can teach a class over the network and provide course access to students in all the networked schools. Interactive distance learning networks are less expensive to build and operate than a new large school; they can be run by participating schools; they can offer high-quality instruction; they engage students with technology; and they preserve the advantages of small schools. Small size also makes it easier for teachers to organize hands-on learning opportunities that engage students in rigorous academic work that has meaningful consequences in the local rural community.”

The Oregon Small Schools Initiative (OSSSI) offers these examples from rural schools in the state and some borrowed from other small schools across the nation.

- **Set high expectations for all students.** Academically rigorous schools treat all students as if they are college bound. The school eliminates low-level, remedial-type sections of core classes to send the message that students cannot just get by doing unchallenging work. The academically rigorous school provides students with opportunities to earn dual credits by taking college-level classes, and opens those classes to all students. Students are required to take the SAT and ACT, so that college is an option for everyone. But academically rigorous schools do not just raise the bar, they also provide the supports necessary to ensure that all students can meet more stringent course and graduation requirements.
- **Depth over breadth.** Schools can demand rigorous intellectual work from students only if they give up the goal of superficially covering as much content as possible. Not only are course catalogs scaled back, but topic lists within courses also are pruned to achieve focus and depth. Effective schools enable students to develop a deep understanding of complex issues by selecting broad topics that act as a framework for many related ideas. Students study and explore these ideas from multiple perspectives and build an understanding of their interconnectedness while also building an understanding of core academic concepts.

- **Cross-curricular integration.** Integrating curriculum across content areas develops skills and knowledge while expanding students' ability to understand conceptual relationships, and think creatively and critically. When concepts and ideas from different courses are brought into meaningful association, students draw their own conclusions and exert a power over their knowledge that motivates them to learn. Cross-curricular integration assumes a holistic, real-world approach to learning. Using common, broad concepts to frame specific subject-area content is representative of how we generalize, analyze and compare ideas in day-to-day life and work. Through cross-curricular integration students develop durable skills and knowledge; they gain what they need for a lifetime of decision-making and problem solving in a way that departmentalized subject matter cannot. The success of cross-curricular integration requires a school-wide commitment. Interdepartmental teams of teachers need time and space to collaborate and plan together.
- **Curriculum mapping.** Curriculum maps document the topics and skills that have been planned, taught and learned, helping teachers determine interventions and next steps. Curriculum maps help groups of teachers compare what has been covered in other grades, revealing repetition and gaps in the curriculum across disciplines, and highlighting strengths and weaknesses in aligning curriculum with district and state standards. Curriculum maps are useful in organizing and planning cross-curricular integration because they outline areas of thematic overlap across disciplines. Curriculum mapping fosters and supports collaboration among teachers, and promotes more effective instruction.

The Bottom Line

Simply increasing curriculum offerings does not guarantee a richer, more complete academic experience for students. In fact, smaller schools are uniquely equipped to do some of the things that are more closely aligned with student success than just expanding the breadth of the curriculum offerings. Interdisciplinary teaching, making sure all students are in grade-level coursework (perhaps with tutorial help and support), and achieving curricular efficiency through curriculum mapping are more powerful ways to promote achievement and authentic learning. And those strategies can be used very effectively by all schools, regardless of their size.

References

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