

School Size

By David Knuckey

School size, and the closure or amalgamation of small schools, is a contentious worldwide issue. In the last two decades, there has been a shift in opinion on the benefit of closing or consolidating small schools.

This has been particularly divisive in South Australia, where the State Government recently amalgamated dozens of schools across the state in a money-saving exercise.

School size is one of many factors that can influence school quality. The debate on school size centres around two issues - the impact of size on education quality and financial efficiency.

School closures have been particularly common in regional areas. With continued population shifts from the country to the city, many young people have left regional areas. Improved highways and road systems and improvements in cars have also strengthened the case for school consolidation. Students can travel further, quicker - allowing children to attend schools further away from home.

A 2014 report reviews multiple international studies on the impact of school size and of consolidating or amalgamating small schools into larger ones.

History

From the 1930s until the 1970s, worldwide policy favoured an increase in school size. Larger schools were perceived as more effective and until the 1970s, research showed they were also more efficient.

After the 1980s and 1990s, however, studies indicated that there were limits to the benefits of large schools and that smaller schools

created their own academic and social benefits. As such, the trend to consolidation into large schools has reversed. In the 1990s, the number of high schools in New York City nearly doubled, as new small schools opened.

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How School Size Effects Students

Governments arguing that larger schools are good for education claim that they promote better teacher and learning and do so at lower costs than small schools - but what does the research actually say?

Curriculum

The main claim South Australians heard when the Super Schools were announced was that larger schools provide students with a broader range of subjects and that this leads to better student outcomes.

However, a small school that focuses on a few high quality courses can also achieve excellent student results and much of the material covered in specialised courses in large schools, can also be taught in regular courses in small schools.



School Size *Continued*

Research reveals that there is no reliable relationship between school size and curriculum quality and that the strength of this relationship decreases as schools become larger.

A broader curriculum does not benefit all students equally. In fact, only a few students are likely to take advantage of extra subjects. Data also shows that a more varied curriculum is likely to benefit students who are already achieving better results.

Smaller schools with a narrow curriculum, focusing on core subjects may help achieve better results for all students.

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Student Attitudes Toward Learning

Student attitudes are more positive in smaller schools - teachers and students have closer relationships and teachers are able to respond to the individual needs of students.

Teachers, parents and students have higher academic expectations in small schools. Research also shows that smaller schools are especially beneficial for students from poorer areas and minority students.

Attendance

Evidence shows that students who transfer to small schools improve their attendance. This is likely due to the personalised attention in small schools that allows for fast identification of frequently absent students and those at risk of dropping out.

School amalgamations may increase truancy and dropout rates in rural schools, especially if transportation time is high or there is a lack of convenient transportation.

Social Behaviour and Student Well-Being

A key disadvantage of large schools is the associated discipline problems. In small schools, teachers typically know students better and can identify behavioural problems quickly and more easily.

The close ties between teachers and students remove anonymity and create an environment where problems are more visible. Data shows that small schools are better at preventing disruptive behaviour and are more supportive of adolescent development.

Conversely, in larger schools, when discipline is a problem, administrators tend to implement restrictive and disciplinary actions, which can increase dropout rates.

Extra-Curricular Activities

Studies have found that smaller schools promote student participation in activities more than large schools do. Although large schools may be able to offer a broader set of activities, these are often over-crowded, reducing participation for some students.

Smaller schools tend to promote more equitable participation, while larger schools typically polarise activity with a group of very active participants and a large group of students who do not participate in any activity.

Community Links

Smaller schools forge stronger links with the school's community. Teachers and students are more likely to interact with parents and the community, creating a stronger climate of cooperation.

In smaller schools, parents have a better perception of the impact of their participation in school activities, which may remain unnoticed in larger schools. The stronger links between the school and parents is expected to enhance student outcomes.

A study on school amalgamations found that, with larger school size, teachers and parents report a reduction in interaction with each other. After consolidation, the school authority is perceived to be more distant, centralised and concentrated.

Student Attitudes

Students are likely to show a stronger sense of belonging in small schools. In a survey of students in small schools, researchers



found students appreciated the family-like atmosphere, where the teachers know them very well.

Additionally, because of the close interaction between school and community, teachers had a better understanding of their students' backgrounds.

The Effect of School Size on Efficiency

A common argument in favour of amalgamation and larger school size is that they are more cost-efficient - however, larger schools come with certain difficulties that can actually increase the cost of schooling.

Capital Costs

Larger schools can benefit from economies of scale. Resources can be purchased at a lower per unit price when bought in larger quantities. Larger schools can invest more widely in facilities such as libraries, computer rooms, laboratories and sports facilities, when there are sufficient students to efficiently utilise these facilities.

Operating Costs

Scale of economies can also effect operating costs. Larger schools can benefit from bulk buying and acquire more material supplies per student at lower costs.

However, these benefits decline once a certain level of enrolments is reached. For example, there is a limit to the capacity of a fixed number of principals and staff to manage large schools.

Transportation Costs

Offsetting the benefits of the purchasing power of large schools are transportation costs and possibly higher salary costs.

Amalgamated schools have higher transportation costs as students and staff have to travel longer distances to reach the schools. Transportation costs is one of the most under-considered issues in the amalgamation debate.

In rural communities in particular, the increase in travel time resulting from school amalgamation may make it unfeasible.

Increased bus ride time is one the most problematic aspects of school consolidation. Besides the cost of transportation, longer commuting time can have a negative impact of students' lives. It increases fatigue, reduces attentiveness in class and reduces the time available for recreation and their family.

Extra transport time also means students can't participate in sports and extra-curricular activity. Long commute time,

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unaffordable or unsafe transport options may even increase the risk of dropping out, especially for those students who expect lower returns from education.

Effects of School Closure on the Community

Social Capital

Small schools and those in regional areas are a source of social capital and community cohesion. Schools are a meeting point and a place for forging bonds with the community. This is vital in regional areas, where schools frequently resort to the community to compensate for the lack of other school resources.

Other Services Provided By Schools

In rural areas, schools frequently provide expanded services. These can be related to education (such as study centres for young people and adults), or a preschool. They can also be used for community activities - everything from small business, to community services to polling booths.

Impact on the Local Economy

Schools have a positive effect on the local economy. Maintaining small schools stops the loss of young, economically active adults through migration. It has been argued that school amalgamation leads to lost taxes, declining property values and lost business.

Conclusion

The report concludes that 'contrary to earlier claims that larger schools were better, recent trends indicate there are benefits to smaller schools, and that there may be a limit to the positive effects of larger schools'.

While there may be some financial benefits to governments from amalgamating small schools into larger ones - they come at a financial cost to families and the local community. And these financial benefits may come at an educational cost to students and professional cost to teachers. Even where some education benefits occur in larger schools, such as with broader curricula, they are not equally spread among students. ■

Source: "School Size Policies: A Literature Review
OECD Education Working Paper No. 106"