

Hot Topic

Does School Size Matter?

'Small is Beautiful or the Bigger the Better...'

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Imagine a school where the teachers and children all know each other by name. Imagine a school where students belong to a vertically-grouped class for the whole of their time at the school.

In many primary schools in the UK, these situations are a reality. On the other hand, secondary schools are generally large institutions – often on split sites, where even the staff don't know each other well.

The UK Government is funding the creation of 327 new Secondary Schools by 2011. Most of these schools will have over 1000 students on roll. But the statistics of their impact make sobering reading.

Last year, 340,000 16-year-olds left school with no A-C grade qualifications at GCSE and 1.2 million 16-22 year olds are currently out of work, with 70,000 in the Youth Justice system. Most of these students had previously been excluded from their secondary schools.

A closer look at the 340,000 who failed to gain A-C qualifications reveals the surprising fact that 40% of these young people were average or above average in attainment when they left primary school. So what happens to them in the five years at secondary school? Will brand new buildings make any significant difference to this drop out phenomena? Or is it possible that in a smaller setting where it is easier to belong, to be noticed and attended to – more students can be 'held' within the education system having their needs met and their issues acknowledged and supported. With half a million of our country's 11-18-year-olds currently taught in schools with over 1500 pupils, and the average size of a comprehensive school now 1100, many people are beginning to ask the question, 'Does the size of a school matter?'

From an economic viewpoint, bigger schools would seem to be more cost-effective. In terms of staff expertise and the range of curriculum opportunity a larger school can offer, bigger may seem better. The same economic argument drives the recent closure of some of the smallest rural primary schools. However, from a pupil point of view, these small institutions are very often the very schools in which it is 'best' to be a pupil. Children and their families are individually known, supported and nurtured. The links between school, family and wider community are closely interwoven, giving children security and a sense that they truly belong to a caring community. They are in a safe place to be fully known, to make mistakes and to learn.

Some children transfer successfully to large secondary schools, but the more vulnerable consistently fail to thrive in the way that they did at primary school. Interestingly, many parents also fail to make the transition happily and successfully and comment that they feel 'excluded' or 'unwelcome' in the bigger school. The feeling of 'belonging' would appear to be just as important for families as for pupils. What can larger schools do to create the 'small school' feel for both pupils and families?

James Wetz, former Headteacher and researcher at the University of Bristol, recently reported in a 'Dispatches' documentary for Channel 4, on ways in which 'schools within schools' are being created in two instances in Boston and New York, USA. Research indicates that in both schools there are improvements in attendance and standards of achievement.

If teachers, headteachers, governors and policy makers are open to the increasing evidence 'small is better' for students, then the two really interesting challenges arise: how to translate this factor into new school building programmes and how to change the current learning environment for the hundreds of thousands of pupils currently in large schools.

One aspect of the challenge is how to support staff to see how important their individual and collective contribution is to the 'belonging' culture of any school. In recent years, there is evidence that tutoring and pastoral work have often been compromised by the challenge of so many disaffected and disengaged adolescents. Yet, ironically it may be largely due to the lack of a 'belonging' culture in many large schools that these difficult behaviours proliferate.

Traditionally in the secondary sector, departments and faculties have always played a valuable role in nurturing a caring 'niche' for the talented, gifted or hard-working pupil. There is also the power of shared interest, engagement and projects which give pupils a strong sense of belonging through extra-curricular activities such as the school play, choir, sports teams, Christian Union.) Through these connections pupils become better known and valued by individual staff. At the same time, however, the creation of these 'belonging' places for some pupils can at the same time create a feeling of 'exclusion' for others unless they, too, have their secure 'niche' within the school. The challenge of creating sufficient 'places' for each pupil to feel a sense of belonging is a huge one. The curriculum, the timetabled day, tutor groupings, teacher training, use of support staff and the ethos

and meaning of 'success' in the school might all require some courageous reappraisal before all pupils can benefit from this determined effort to make 'big' into 'not so big'. Specifically, it might be time to restore tutor time and ensure that all class tutors are confident in ways to work with students' emotional needs as well as their learning. There are ways of ensuring that school routines and practices respect and include the range of cultural backgrounds of the families who belong to the community.

There are some interesting examples of larger schools taking these courageous steps. Ralph Allen School in Bath is currently piloting several initiatives to improve a sense of 'belonging' for some of its more vulnerable pupils. A group of Year 6 pupils were identified, prior to joining the school as likely to benefit from extra support and have and have been taking part in a nurture programme which means they have the same teacher every afternoon and are 'off-timetable' for this section of the day. Research indicates clear benefits from this approach including better communication and collaboration with the parents and families of the nurture group children partly achieved through a family genealogy project undertaken by the students.

Kingdown School in Wiltshire has reinstated the House System and introduced a 'vertical' tutor system, based on family and house groupings. The Headteacher's stated aim is 'One school, five communities'. The school also has an established student mentoring system, with Year 10 pupils visiting selected Year 6 pupils in their Primary Schools and then continuing the relationship once the youngsters start at the 'big school' in Year 7. Ralph Allen is about to trial a similar system.

Both schools are highly successful according to Ofsted reports.

The necessary investment to ensure that schools are places that promote inclusion and belonging is as much about intent and commitment as it is about financial spend. But whatever the direct cost, it might well be less than the millions we spend working remedially with people who have been excluded, who are long term unemployed or are within the criminal justice system.