

Why smaller K-8 schools are superior!

By Rob Baker and Kathi Sittner

When the Miami-Dade County Public School system opened the G. Holmes Braddock High School in 1990, this new 35-million dollar school had beautiful buildings with state of the art computer labs, a media center/library, and athletic facilities. It opened serving only 9th, 10th, and 11th graders and was meant to relieve the fast growing student population in the west Miami suburbs, but it still had 3,800 students in buildings which has a capacity of 4,000. When the new 9th graders arrived the following fall, the student population had ballooned to 5,400 students, making it the largest school in the United States. In order to handle the extra students, 33 portable classrooms were placed on the baseball field. There were a principal, five assistant principals, four deans of students and two full time Miami police officers to deal with the numerous discipline cases and gang violence in this “little city.” Fortunately another high school was being built three miles away. When it opened in 1995, Braddock’s population dropped to 4,200, but many problems remained.

This may seem like the exception but, in fact, it is the rule in many communities across the United States. Why, you ask? In the 1950s, with the Baby Boom population bulge, elementary school populations suddenly swelled, overwhelming small existing schools. Districts left the youngest children in the school and skimmed off the older ones into new junior high (7th-8th grades) and middle school (7th-9th or 6th-8th grades) facilities. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, schools that were built from 1900-1950 were becoming structurally unsound. Most school districts wanted to “fix up” these older schools. However, they soon discovered that the cost to remove asbestos, rewire electrical systems, replace plumbing features, and retrofit schools with ramps to make them accessible to handicapped students would cost multi-millions of dollars. Many construction experts said it would be more cost-effective to build a new school than to retrofit a school for these items. In more recent years, concerns about earthquakes and tornadoes have also resulted in new buildings. Therefore, there has been a steady increase in the building of new schools throughout the country.

Since most school districts have limited financial capital, they need to go to the local voters and ask for bond money via a local election. In order to make these bonds reasonable, many school districts presented plans to the community to keep costs at a minimum by closing older and smaller schools and building fewer newer schools. Although some officials and concerned parents voiced concerns over the elimination of these smaller schools, the majority of community leaders advocated the “larger but fewer” philosophy to sell it to the tax-paying public. It was easy to support the idea by pointing to savings in the high costs of school administrative and support personnel, land, and utilities. The middle school philosophy soon became the norm. In recent years, with the Baby Boom over, leading to a reduction in student numbers, and with a flight of middle-class families from cities to the suburbs, school populations became unbalanced, more small schools closed, and more large middle schools were opened.

Has student achievement improved during the past three decades as a result of the change to a separate middle school model? There are conflicting results, or at least conflicting interpretations of the results. The National Middle School Association points out that “successful education for students in grades 5-8 does not depend on grade configuration so much as what goes on in the classroom.” Specifically, schools get better results whenever every student is engaged “in a relevant and challenging curriculum in an environment that fosters respectful and supportive relationships among students, faculty, families, and the community;” when the teachers and administrators are prepared and committed to teaching this age level; when there is ongoing professional development for all faculty; when decisions are based on data that guides student learning and instructional practice; and when strong partnerships are built between schools and families. Clearly, this makes sense, and they point to this information to support their belief that middle schools are a viable alternative. However, a growing number of studies show that students in K-8 or K-12 schools generally perform better on standardized achievement tests than those in middle and junior high schools. In addition, a study by educator John Alspaugh found that as the number of school-to-school transitions increased, “there was

an associated increase in the high school dropout rates.” The studies point to other results that are just as important in considering which school model is the better alternative. Student violence toward other students, teachers, and staff has gone up significantly in both rural and urban schools during the past two decades. Students involved in gangs have risen in a similar proportion. The numbers of young students committing suicide have also gone up. What caused these increases? Educational researchers and sociologists are studying the reasons, but it is plainly obvious that making schools larger has not helped the situation.

Numerous recent research articles are citing the benefits of smaller schools, and in some areas of the country, there is a small but **growing trend** to try to create new K-8 schools, but unfortunately, school districts all over the San Francisco Bay area have continued to close the smallest schools and consolidate them into larger schools in order to alleviate budget deficits. Both the San Francisco and the Oakland Unified Schools Districts closed at least five schools last year and are planning on closing at least that many this fall. Jefferson Elementary School District closed two of its smallest schools last year and moved the students to larger schools. South San Francisco Unified School District closed one elementary last fall. Two years ago the Pacifica School District closed its two small middle schools and moved them into one large school. It is a beautiful school, but it has over 1,000 students attending academic classes with as many as 32 students.

Educator Kathleen Cotton reviewed many research articles on small schools and published the research article “School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance.” She says that **there is a definitive consensus in the results of the research regarding the superiority of small schools:**

1. Academic achievement is at least equal, and often superior, in small schools.
2. Attendance is better in small schools.
3. A smaller percentage of students drop out of small schools.
4. Students have a greater sense of belonging in small schools.
5. Social behavior - as measured by truancy, discipline problems, violence, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation - is more positive in small schools.
6. Interpersonal relations between students, teachers, and administrators are more positive in small schools.
7. Academic attitudes and healthy self-concepts are higher in small schools. Attitudes toward school in general and toward particular subjects are more positive in small schools.
8. Teacher and administrator attitudes toward their work is higher in small schools.
9. Students in small schools take more of the responsibility for their own learning; their learning opportunities are more often individualized, experiential, and relevant to the world outside of school; classes are generally smaller; and scheduling is much more flexible.
10. Grouping and instructional strategies associated with higher student performance are more often implemented in small schools - team teaching, integrated curriculum, multiage grouping, cooperative learning, and performance assessments.

According to Cotton, the **attributes that account for the superiority of small schools include:**

1. All staff members must communicate and work together in a supportive learning community. This relationship means that fewer students get overlooked or alienated.
2. The adults and the students know each other and, therefore, care more about one another.
3. There is a higher rate of parent involvement.
4. A diversity of successful instructional strategies (e.g. cooperative learning, integrated curriculum, performance assessments, etc.) are more often utilized.

Other researchers (Keith Look of the Philadelphia Education Fund; Paula Becker; Deborah Kasak of the Educational Development Center, Inc.; a report by the Rand Corporation) add a few more insights:

1. Parent/teacher partnerships of shared knowledge and expectations increase student success. Parents in a K-8 school are more likely to stay involved in their child's school life longer, because they are already comfortable with the school and its staff, and because younger siblings/family generally enroll in the same facility.
2. A K-8 school can incorporate a distinct, rigorous, and developmentally appropriate middle grades program within a K-8 grade span, so that it proceeds naturally and incrementally from the curriculum begun in the lower grades.
3. Small class groupings allow for academic acceleration and remediation more readily than large classes. Students can work at a more individualized pace, rather than be tracked in a lower or higher level than is advisable for them.
4. The onset of puberty is a particularly poor time to start a new and unfamiliar school situation; it can be very stressful and can sometimes have long-lasting negative effects. It is better to allow children to remain in a familiar environment where they are expected to conform to the demands of a community that knows them than to be thrust with anonymity into a larger and unfamiliar, peer-driven environment which requires a struggle to find a new place or status.
5. Mentoring programs found in smaller schools help to keep students on track.
6. Middle grade students in a K-8 school behave differently than in a middle school. They take on the role of protector and role model as opposed to having to establish new reputations upon entering a middle school.

Kathleen Cotton's research and her conclusions concerning the benefits of small schools suggest that school districts should be making schools smaller, but alas, most school districts are heading in the opposite direction. Researcher Williams writes, "It appears that the determinates of school size are seldom the result of research... More often, school size is the result of other factors - political, economic, social, and demographic."

How does this research relate to us?

The positive K-8 qualities spoken of by Kathleen Cotton and others are ingrained in the daily life of Hilldale School. With its small class sizes, great teachers who work together collaboratively, family-like atmosphere, an accelerated academic curriculum which allows for differentiation, and attention to academic and social guidance, Hilldale is bucking the trend and doing exactly what the research says is the most effective way to develop children to the fullest intellectually, physically, and emotionally. It is these small-school, K-8 qualities which are helping to create the supportive environment and positive goals and outcomes which are so important in our students' early academic life. We believe that it is these same qualities which will prepare them to develop as positive members of society and to succeed in their future education and careers.