



Education In Our Community

Small Schools, Big Benefits



(NAPSA)—Are smaller schools better? Research increasingly shows that they are, especially for kids from poorer communities. In a recent study of the relationships between school size, poverty, and student achievement, researchers Craig Howley and Robert Bickel found that kids from less affluent communities do better academically in smaller schools.

As the benefits of small schools are publicized, many districts are scrambling to make their large schools smaller—often by creating smaller “learning communities” or “schools within schools.”

Unfortunately, however, these efforts are focused mostly on urban schools.

“Just as urban areas are getting on the small schools bandwagon, the small schools of rural America are in real danger of being consolidated out of existence,” says Dr. Rachel Tompkins, President of the Rural School and Community Trust, a national rural education advocacy group. “More and more rural communities are losing their local schools because people mistakenly believe that one big centralized school is more efficient—and therefore better—than several small community schools.”

The result, she says, “is large consolidated high schools to which students must be bused long distances from their homes, where there is no sense of community investment in the school, and

where parent and community participation in school affairs suffers because the school is so distant.”

Nearly 25 percent of U.S. schoolchildren go to school in rural areas or small towns of fewer than 25,000. Rural and small-town schools make up the largest proportion—24.7 percent—of public schools in the U.S. Unlike their urban counterparts, many rural and small-town secondary schools (grades 9-12) are small: almost 52 percent have enrollments of 400 or fewer students, and more than one-quarter have enrollments under 200.

These small rural schools yield many of the benefits touted by researchers: better attendance, lower drop-out rates, higher achievement, and the opportunity for students to be known and valued by their peers, teachers, and other adult members of the community. Most importantly, these schools are central to the community and its life, convenient for community gatherings and participation in school events, and involved in the economic and social fabric of the community.

“As research continues to show the merits of small schools,” says the Rural Trust’s Dr. Tompkins, “we need to pay attention not just to making city schools smaller, but also to assuring that the small schools of rural America are equally valued and protected.”

For more information on rural schools, visit www.ruraledu.org.