SMALLER CLASSES

Influence Student Success

Tell me and I will forget.
Show me and I may remember.
Involve me and I will understand.
~ Chinese Proverb

MIDDLE SCHOOL/JUNIOR HIGH/INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL—whatever you call it—the years between elementary school and high school are pivotal for personal and academic development. Adolescence is a challenging time of life. Parents may wonder, then, how it can also be a time for young people to discover the joy of learning, master academic subjects, make good friends, and understand themselves.

Today the challenge seems even greater with problems and diversions like texting, bullying, and grown-up-too-soon social situations. Large middle school environments can be daunting for even the most confident of young people. Students have to contend with many aspects of the whole teen experience. Worry about fashion, cyber and direct harassment and the stigma that being smart isn’t cool all have little to do with the purpose at hand—to expand, grow, explore, become active lifelong learners.

Despite wide acceptance that middle school-aged students are destined to suffer through their young adolescence—a sense that this time of life simply isn’t a happy one—this does not have to be the case.

Educators have proclaimed that “bigger is better” for so long that many have become believers in a doctrine that they may not have fully examined. Though large classrooms can work for some students, among others the big size of many schools may be one factor contributing to declines in test scores and increases in violence. 1 With research showing that a smaller classroom setting can be of great benefit, nurturing students toward their highest potential, Americans are rediscovering the small school. In a small learning community, teachers are able to use a variety of instructional approaches in order to match a student’s specific learning style. The content of the teaching is adapted to the interests and needs of the students, thus they are more apt to engage. When engaged, they learn skills which will ensure that they are well poised for achievement.

While some of the reasons for creating large schools have been about economics (i.e., taxpayers can apply dollars toward one location versus multiple smaller facilities), studies show that the benefits and long-term cost need to be considered in relation to the success of students. 2 Research indicates small schools can operate more flexibly and responsively than large schools because there is less formal bureaucracy. With fewer students, there is more of a chance for direct involvement in all activities, which promotes deeper learning and engagement. Students, teachers, administrators, and board members in small schools have the opportunity to get to know each other better, there are higher levels of teacher and student satisfaction, and community members are more involved, thereby imbuing all involved parties with a sense of pride and place. According to a 2002 study published by KnowledgeWorks Foundation, “There is less violence in small schools, less vandalism, a heightened sense of belonging, and better attendance. Students earn higher grade point averages and more participate in extracurricular activities.” 3

Learning is a lifelong process. Small class size alone does not ensure a decent education. Teachers, students, leaders, school size and community are among factors influencing educational success. Parents ultimately have the primary responsibility for educating their children. Considering how a particular child learns best can be the basis for the parent’s decision to purposely match the learning style with an environment to meet these needs. In a smaller classroom setting, the chances increase that children can be met where they are.

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2 Education.com/reference/articles/Br_Advantages_SmallSchools.html. See Bruce O. Barker, Educational Resource Information Center (US Department of Education).