

High School Size, Organization, and Content: What Matters for Student Success?

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As concerns about the outcomes of comprehensive high schools, especially in cities, have intensified, initiatives to launch small schools and small learning communities have become widespread. These have been promoted on the basis of studies finding that, other things equal, smaller schools appear to produce higher achievement, lower dropout rates, lower rates of violence and vandalism, more positive feelings about self and school, and more participation in school activities. These outcomes appear more pronounced for students who are traditionally lower achieving. However, there are competing findings about the effects of school size and organizational features in diverse contexts. This review examines these findings across a wide range of studies over the last thirty years, while raising research concerns that require future attention, including the lack of randomized trials, scarcity of controlled comparison group designs, inattention in many correlational studies to selection effects, size values, and nonlinear relationships, and absence of modeling that takes multiple levels of variables into account.

We conclude that, while size appears to matter in many studies—especially for the affective outcomes of schooling like student attachment, behavior, and persistence—the effects of small size may be more pronounced for lower-socioeconomic-status students, and the influences of size appear to be mediated by other features of school organizations. In addition to student backgrounds, important variables that appear to influence high school outcomes for different groups of students include organizational structures that create more coherence and “communal” orientation, reduce curriculum differentiation, increase instructional authenticity and rigor, and enhance personalization (that is, the extent to which students are well known by adults). Smaller schools may provide the opportunity for important educational conditions, such as stronger relationships, greater student involvement, and greater academic press, but they do not, by themselves, guarantee that those conditions will exist. Finally, the processes used to create smaller schools or units within large schools have been highly varied, and both the design of schools and the change processes used to create them affect their success.