

## Grade Configuration and School Size Research

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Generally, there is evidence to indicate that school size, in and of itself, may not be the primary factor upon student achievement. There is some research to suggest smaller schools perform better, and there is some research to suggest they may not be, in and of itself, a major factor. There is also some research to suggest certain grade level configurations are better than others in terms of achievement impact, yet others suggest, as a major single factor, grade level configuration does not have a large impact. Research in all cases depends upon the method used as well as sample size.

This sampling illustrates the points above:

*“In the United States, contrary to most other findings in the literature, the evidence suggested that bigger schools perform better. Only for Norway we concluded that school size and student performance are entirely uncorrelated. Overall, it seems as if student performance is uncorrelated with school size in most countries, but if a significant relationship is estimated, it mostly implies that bigger is better” ( Schütz, Gabriela 2006)*

*“School size reforms often occur as part of a portfolio of reforms to school policies, such as governance practices, curricular reforms, and human resource policies. Thus, an empirical challenge presents itself when trying to isolate the effects of just one dimension of a school reform package. A weakness of much of the existing studies on school size effects is that they are cross-sectional in nature, and thus they fail to clearly isolate the effects of variations in school size from other reforms occurring at the same time”(Kisida, 2013)*

*“In this section we discuss the results from each of our model specifications. Our results reveal two key findings, which point to the importance of school size as a contributing factor to student achievement growth. First, school size has a significant impact on student achievement in both math and reading. Large schools with enrollments greater than 590 students have significant negative impacts on student academic achievement. Second, these impacts vary by grade level. In grades 6-10, school size has the greatest effect with student achievement significantly declining in schools that enroll more than 638 students (Kisida, 2013)*

*This paper presents a regression model that analyzes the effects of school enrollment and schools per district on costs per pupil and standardized test passing rates in Indiana elementary and secondary schools. This model employed data from the Indiana Department of Education and the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. The results showed that districts with more schools had higher costs per pupil and that a school's enrollment had no significant effect on student achievement. In addition, the results suggest that school consolidation could cut costs while not necessarily lowering student achievement levels (Steiner, J. (2011).*

Some research points to lower achievement performance in larger schools for students of low socio economic status, and earlier studies through the late nineties seemed to indicate schools with no more than 900 students seemed to perform better than those of the grade level configurations that were larger than that. There is research to suggest that numerous transitions may not have a positive effect on students, especially female students.

Research has been cited to indicate the worth of neighborhood schools and it has been stated that our school district was built upon neighborhood schools at the elementary level. Statements that values of homes decreasing due to closed neighborhood school should be researched as there is evidence to suggest that this is not the case in our school district. In fact, depending on what is done with closed schools recent history of sales may preserve or increase surrounding home values, and the tax base may be increased depending upon what the school or school site is used for after it is sold. This was the case at the site of the former Brighton School which was sold, demolished, and replaced with a well designed and built senior living complex. There may be other uses for school buildings or district buildings that are sold which may help the community meet other needs it deems important. Senior living and higher education possibilities are just two examples, there may be others.

Finally, there is much research that points to the correlates of effective schools, and these correlates may be exercised in small, medium, or large schools. The correlates are well documented in the research (Lezotte, Larry 1991, 2009):

### **1. Instructional Leadership**

The effective school practices that the principal is the "leader of leaders" not the "leader of followers." The principal understands and applies the characteristics of instructional effectiveness in the management of the instructional program. The principal and all adults must take an active role in instructional leadership.

### **2. Clearly Stated and Focused Mission**

The effective school has a clearly articulated mission. The staff shares an understanding and commitment to the mission and the instructional goals, priorities, and assessment procedures it projects. The staff accepts responsibility and accountability for promoting and achieving the mission of learning for all students.

### **3. Safe and Positive Environment**

The effective school has a positive, purposeful, businesslike environment, which is free from the threat of physical harm. Desirable student behaviors are consistently articulated and expectations are clear. Students and teachers help each other and what is best for all. This environment nurtures interaction between students and teachers that is collaborative, cooperative, and student centered.

#### **4. High Expectations for ALL Students**

The effective school expects that all students can attain mastery of the essential school skills. In order to meet these high expectations, a school is restructured to be an institution designed for "learning" not "instruction." Teachers and students must have access to "tools" and "time" to help all students learn.

#### **5. Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress**

The effective school frequently measures academic student progress through a variety of assessment procedures. Assessment results are used to improve individual student performance and also improve instructional delivery. Assessment results will show that alignment must exist between the intended, taught, and tested curriculum.

#### **6. Maximize Learning Opportunities**

The effective school allocates and protects a significant amount of time for instruction of the essential skills. The instruction must take place in an integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum. Effective instruction time must focus on skills and curriculum content that are considered essential, that are assessed, and most valued. There should be abandonment of less important content.

#### **7. Positive Communication - School, Home, Community**

The effective school builds trust and communication within the school, parents and community. Forming partnerships with the parents and community enables all stakeholders to support the mission of the school and have the same goals and expectations.

I ask all Board members, community members, and employees to keep an open mind regarding the consolidation of services and buildings in our district. With careful planning, we may find that although different, due to the number and uniqueness of our buildings, we may be able to restructure, preserve and increase student programming with some consolidation, especially in light of dwindling reserves and salaries and benefits that are costing more and more to sustain.

Cost benefit analysis needs to be performed on the suggested three scenarios as financial, program, and functional opportunities and challenges of each will be explored.

A comprehensive grade configuration and school size literature review is contained here, complete with "live links" if you wish to explore some research further on your own.

<http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/poptopics/gradeconfig.html>