

Small Public Schools: Returning Education to Families and Communities

**Gregory A. Smith, Associate Professor of Education
Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon**

In debates over vouchers or charter schools, many educators generally focus on the threat these innovations pose to the integrity of public schools. They rarely acknowledge the good sense behind these efforts, however. People drawn to charters or vouchers hope to place their children in educational settings that are more personal, supportive, and academically demanding. Some also seek to achieve a higher level of control over their children's education than is possible in most public schools. Critics need to give credence to these legitimate desires.

State mandates to consolidate schools and standardize student assessment have contributed to the problems these people are fleeing. Since the 1940s, school consolidation has reduced the number of elementary and secondary public schools in the United States by a startling 69 percent—from about 200,000 to 62,000 -- even as the national population has *grown* 70 percent. The schools children attend today are increasingly distant from their homes and neighborhoods, and are, on average, five times as large as those their grandparents attended a half-century ago. As schools have ballooned, students and parents find it more and more difficult to feel that they are known and cared for by teachers or administrators. Large schools also tend to leave more students on the margins, unable to find a place where they can discover and share their talents and interests.

National efforts since the 1980s to increase the accountability of individual schools and districts for student achievement have increased the distance between schools and those they serve. No longer can school boards shape curriculum to meet local needs or determine appropriate levels of student performance. These decisions are now being made by state-level elected officials or bureaucrats influenced by federal and corporate leaders.

So it should come as no surprise that increasing numbers of Americans want to reverse this situation, either by using tax dollars in the form of vouchers to attend private schools, or by creating charter schools freed from bureaucratic requirements. These strategies, however, risk undermining public education itself. Privatizing this essential institution threatens to widen the gap between schools that serve economically privileged students and those whose families are just getting by or worse. Left unchecked, markets tend to reward people with resources and ignore those without. There is no reason to assume that education is immune from this fact.

This is an outcome we must prevent. Progressive educators and voucher or charter supporters of good will could lead the way by calling a truce, reaching out to one another, and searching for common ground. Their joint agenda could focus on returning the control of public schools to teachers and the people they serve with the intent of supporting higher levels of achievement for all students. An emerging national effort to create and protect small schools demonstrates how this can be done.

Over the past several years, educators associated with the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, a foundation-supported coalition of school reformers in several major cities, have been showing how to establish and run small schools that are both effective and affordable. The Annenberg Rural Challenge, a school reform project supported by the Walter J. Annenberg

Foundation, has been achieving similar ends in non-urban districts around the country. In cities such as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, educators and activists are creating small schools where teachers, parents, and students play a major role in shaping their schools' mission, curriculum, and educational practices. In rural areas, they are fighting to keep remaining small schools from being consolidated and asserting their right to determine educational standards based on community values and needs. In each instance, organizers are developing and maintaining the forms of supportive and positive relationships encountered in the best private schools. These public schools are delivering what the advocates of vouchers and charters want.

Research studies since the 1980s have tracked the impact of small schools on the experiences of students, teachers, and families. Reviews of these studies by Kathleen Cotton and Robert Gladden report that:

- Students in small schools are less alienated than those in large schools and less likely to cut classes, drop out, or engage in violent or disorderly behavior.
- More students in small schools participate in extracurricular activities.
- Students attending small schools are more likely to pass their courses, accumulate the credits needed to graduate, and go on to college; they also score as well or better on standardized tests as students in large schools.
- Parent involvement in small schools is higher than in large schools.
- Small schools are not necessarily more expensive than large schools.¹

These findings offer educators important research support for what many, if not most, have long believed: that small schools do indeed enhance the learning of all students. As small schools activist Michelle Fine writes, "Now that we know small schools produce the optimal conditions for accountability and equity, policy makers have a moral obligation to provide such settings for all youth, especially those who have least benefited from public education to date—those who are poor or working class, and children of color."²

The research also offers educators an opportunity to make common cause with parents and citizens attracted to vouchers and charters, by showing that there is a way to meet the educational needs of their own children, create more effective schools, and do so without debilitating public education.

The task now is for adversaries in educational debates about choice and equity to bridge their differences and create more of the kinds of public schools we know will work—schools that are small, personally supportive, linked to their communities, intellectually vital, and available to all students.

ENDNOTES.

1. Kathleen Cotton, *School Size, School Climate, and School Performance* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1996); Robert Gladden, "The Small School Movement: Review of the Literature," in Michelle Fine and Janis Somerville (editors), *Small Schools, Big Imaginations: A Creative Look at Urban Public Schools* (Chicago: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 1998).
2. Michelle Fine, preface to *Small Schools, Big Imaginations*, p. v.