

A DISTRICT OF A CERTAIN SIZE

An Exploration of the Debate on School District Size

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INTRODUCTION

Like a lady “of a certain age,” school districts of a certain size have sometimes been considered to be, well, not the *most* desirable. The “wrong” size, for the last half century at least, has been size small. How small? That depended on the researcher; some felt that a thousand was big enough, some preferred ten thousand, some never quite specified. But, for a long time in America, the only good school districts were said to be large school districts.

As with most educational issues, the pendulum is swinging back on the subject of district size. During the period from World War II to the middle or late sixties, it would have been difficult to find an administrator willing to suggest that small school districts had any place in the future of public education. The training provided to educators on the subject of district size appears to have been far more unequivocal than the research on the subject. This is demonstrated in Joseph Millard’s (1979) compilation of district size research, which shows that actual research and opinion surveys of educators produce somewhat different conclusions regarding desirable scale for school districts.

During the seventies and eighties, however, some practitioners and researchers have taken a second look at district size. Unimpressed with the track records of monolithic governmental bureaucracies in improving services or cutting costs, concerned about the increasing distance between citizens and the governors of their schools, many current researchers are cautious about the benefits of largeness in school district organization.

In a number of major school reform reports released within the past few years, school districts are all but ignored as reformers focus on the school

site as the “appropriate” seat of decision making, planning, and professional growth (Carnegie, 1986; Berman & Weiler, 1988).

This article is an exploration of the research and the debate on what constitutes the “right” size for school districts. I will discuss current conditions of school districts in terms of size, and the research base which contributed to the trend towards bigness. Three major issues have been identified which guide much of the district size research: fiscal efficiency, school effectiveness, and community identity. Past and recent research will be examined and compared within the framework of these three issues.

And finally, some of the many still unanswered questions will be identified, in the hopes of kindling interest in further research in the field. For, in spite of the massive amount of examination of school district size that has taken place, there still does not seem to be a definitive “right answer” to the issues under discussion.

WHERE ARE WE?

The local school district was once the most numerous governmental entity in this nation. From a system based on one-room school, one-school districts, each with a community board of governors, the American school district has evolved to include districts which enroll almost a million students in thousands of schools, districts which still follow the one-room-school pattern, and every conceivable variation in between.

These districts may be governed by an elected or appointed board, with anywhere from three members to a dozen or more. There may be a single administrator who is superintendent, principal, and teacher all rolled into one; or there may be hundreds of central office administrators, assistant superintendents, associate superintendents, managers of all sorts, and assistants to school principals who have administrative duties.

Within these variations, however, there is a general pattern: School districts are, generally, much larger than they were 50 years ago. School districts, which for many communities have been more consciously woven into the patterns of their lives than have their cities, towns, or counties, have become less local, less intimate — bigger.

How did we come to make such a drastic change to our educational system? What does it mean to be a big district in America today, or a small one? What are the advantages and disadvantages of various district sizes? What does the research say about a “best” size for school districts?

Frankly, these questions are so big and complex that it would be arrogant to claim to be able to answer them. But it is possible to explore them, from the context of the vast body of educational research on the subjects of district size and district reorganization.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Virtually every community has felt it. Almost every school district has considered it or at least discussed it. It has changed the look of the public schools, changed the relationship between communities and school districts, changed the nature of decision making in most of the nation's elementary and high schools. What is it? "It" is the deliberate enlargement of schools and school districts, usually through consolidation of existing schools and districts, known as the "school consolidation movement" of the last half century. Consolidation has changed the face of K-12 education in every state in the nation.

James Guthrie (1979) has identified four major effects of the consolidation movement on the structure of public education: a 65% reduction in the numbers of schools; an 87% reduction in the numbers of school districts (during the same period, the number of students enrolled in the nation's K-12 schools has nearly doubled); a 500% increase in average school size; and a 1500% increase in average school district size, from 200 students to over 3,000. An average elementary *school* today, with 550 students, is more than twice as large as an average 1930 school *district*.

The move to consolidate school districts has its roots in the spread of industrial technology at the beginning of the twentieth century. Mass production of goods was governed by a fiscal equation relating efficiency with ever greater volume of activity at a single, large production center. This equation was embraced by school administrators, who hungered both for legitimacy within the private sector and the increased prestige and perquisites connected with responsibility over a relatively larger public entity (Guthrie, 1979).

A survey of district-size-related research clearly reflects the assumption that "bigger is better." One 1971 summary of professional literature (Educational Research Service, 1971) refers to 26 studies completed between 1939 and 1969. "Optimum" size recommendations in these studies ranged from 9,800 to 50,000 students. "Minimum" sizes cited ranged from 500 to 12,000 students, with 10,000 students being the most common recommendation. The

Educational Research Service (ERS), in a brief on organizational scale, said, "The decrease in the total number of school districts has been 85.9%. . . . The job is, however, far from completed." Small districts (roughly defined as those enrolling fewer than 2,500 pupils) are characterized as "outmoded and outdated." Listed disadvantages of small district size, according to ERS, include "unjustifiably small class sizes . . . barren, meager, insipid curriculum . . . inability to attract high-quality teachers and administrators. . . ."

TABLE 1

DISTRICT SIZE RECOMMENDATION	BASIS FOR SUGGESTED SIZE	YEAR
50 teachers	Professional opinion	1934
40 teachers, 1200 students	Opinion survey	1934
9800-12,000 students	Professional opinion	1934
10,000-20,000 students	Review of literature	1966
3000-5000 students	School administrative cost	1968
1500-2000 students	Business management	1968
1500 students	Review of literature	1969
1000 students	Gross expenditure	1971
400 students	Cost residual	1971
1000 students	Administrative cost	1971
425-10,000 students	Review of literature	1974
Less than 750	Student retention, student participation, graduate productivity, citizen satisfaction, parent willingness to finance school.	1977

Table 1 summarizes the recommendations on district size as reported by Millard in his 1979 look at educational literature.

It is particularly interesting to note the relationship between district size recommendations made in these studies and the factors on which those recommendations are based. At the time of Millard's survey, and indeed at the times of most of the studies he lists, the popular wisdom was that large school districts were substantially more efficient—that is, that they produced an educational program of equal or better quality at less cost than could smaller districts. Yet the smallest district size recommendations in this sampling of professional literature are tendered by those who measured cost factors, such as administrative cost or cost residuals. The largest-size recommendations seem to have grown from opinion surveys and literature searches.

The change in school district size has been consciously pursued within the public sector. Proponents of reorganization argued that only large school districts could offer a full range of programs and services, could operate with

reasonable cost efficiency, and could amass a highly trained staff for optimum quality of output. Whether those proponents were correct is still the subject of continuing debate; Niskanen and Levy (1975), Guthrie (1979), Millard (1979), and Monk and Haller (1986) (among many others) have pointed out deficiencies in much of the original research and called for ongoing, careful study to determine whether in fact "bigger is better."

Criticism of the research of Conant (1959) and others has centered around two major themes. The first is that much of the research failed to consider important cost factors or "diseconomies of scale," such as the cost of transportation for far-flung rural districts (Sher & Thompkins, 1976). The second concern is that, by and large, the researchers supporting largeness on the basis of cost efficiency fail to address questions of program quality or student output, assuming that all districts offer equivalent products which differ only in price (James & Levin, 1970; Niskanen & Levy, 1975; Weaver, 1975).

Regardless of the critics, however, the public schools have continued to reach for bigness. Has public education improved or become more efficient as a result? Here the research is incomplete. Few, if any, studies have been carried out to compare "before and after" conditions of consolidating school districts. As Guthrie wrote in 1979, "The trend toward ever larger units of school 'production' continues in the absence of persuasive analyses that the movement has achieved the objectives held either by its past or present advocates."

FISCAL EFFICIENCY

Fiscal efficiency has been considered the cornerstone of the case for increasing district size. Can a larger district provide an equivalent program for a lower per-student cost than small districts? Or can it provide a superior educational product for the same level of expenditure?

One of the problems with conducting this kind of research is establishing whether programs are, indeed, equivalent. Program assessment is a whole field in its own right, and educational operations do not lend themselves to being summarized with a single variable.

Researchers have attempted several ways of dealing with this issue. Walberg and Fowler (1987) used standardized test scores, corrected for socioeconomic status (SES), and expenditures as variables in assessing programs. Niskanen and Levy (1975) also used achievement test results, corrected for SES and estimated I.Q. Monk and Haller (1986) examined

course offerings and enrollment in the various courses of study, teacher characteristics, and test scores.

A second difficulty in interpreting efficiency research is distinguishing conscious, intentional efficiency from simple resource impoverishment. If true efficiency is a balancing act between money spent and value received, then any expenditure comparison is tainted by arbitrary and unequally applied limitations on income.

There are three aspects of district production and expenditure which are frequently discussed in efficiency research: administrative efficiency, operational efficiency, and purchasing efficiency.

ADMINISTRATIVE EFFICIENCY

Small districts, some researchers argue, spend a disproportionate amount of their budgets supporting minimum administrative staffs in order to meet irreducible "red tape" needs of a modern school district, or conversely, a small district will be unable to hire well-trained specialists or high-quality instructors (ERS, 1971; Education Cooperative Services Unit, 1977).

The California School Boards Association (CSBA, 1986) report indicates some concern by personnel in small districts that it can be difficult to "wear too many hats". On the other hand, Webb & Ohm (1984) found smaller districts more efficient than larger ones in both dollars per student and numbers of administrators per student; Ingraham & Kenney (1965), too, indicate that consolidating districts often retain most of both administrative staffs for a considerable period of time after consolidation.

OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY

School districts incur costs for items such as purchase of heavy maintenance equipment, hiring of specialized teaching or administrative staff, or acquisition of other resources which may not be fully utilized in a small district. Theoretically, a larger district would be able to put a wider range of specialized tools, equipment, and personnel to maximum use. In addition, certain types of programs, notably those for the handicapped and gifted, may be necessary even though there are small numbers of children eligible within a small district.

It seems probable that economies in these areas (regardless of district size) can be effected through formal or informal sharing of programs with neigh-

boring districts or intermediate units. CSBA (1986) reports that over half of all California districts use the services of their County Offices of Education, most frequently to coordinate and provide specialized services and programs in conjunction with other districts or entities (such as business or community groups). Ingraham and Kenney (1965) additionally point out that consolidating districts which had individually been making use of their County Offices' program services sometimes found themselves providing less varied alternatives after consolidating, when forced to rely on their own resources.

PURCHASING EFFICIENCY

This may be the most hotly debated of the three kinds of efficiency. Researchers from Conant in the fifties through the ERS in the seventies have pointed out that discounts are available for volume purchases of equipment and supplies. However, it seems likely that these discounts can be available to small districts as well. Ingraham and Kenney (1965) state, "The purchasing power gained by size could be duplicated by county-wide contracts." Indeed, CSBA (1986) notes that many California districts are using a variety of joint purchasing arrangements.

Sher and Thompkins (1970) take a dim view of the importance of volume purchasing discounts: "During the 1960's, many small rural school districts banded together to form joint purchasing units so that the presumed scale economies could be captured. Instead of saving money, they discovered that one or more of the following things happened: All the money saved by volume purchasing was lost in distributing the purchases . . . or lost by having to hire new personnel to organize and operate the purchasing /distribution operations, or lost by having to overpurchase supplies in order to get the volume discounts."

RURAL DISTRICTS, URBAN DISTRICTS

Are rural schools and urban schools so different that efficiency questions have different answers, depending on where you live? Yes, say Monk and Haller (1986). They contend that many of the purported disadvantages of small districts—narrow course offerings, difficulty attracting talented staff, lack of specialized programs—may in fact be characteristics of the sparse population density of rural areas. They suggest that distances and small numbers of students within a large geographic area will likely perpetuate

problems of this nature regardless of district size. Economies and diseconomies of scale, they say, coexist in a ratio which is unique for each district.

Guthrie (1979) also suggests that economies of scale may be a concept with more validity in urban areas. "For rural districts," he writes, "the evidence regarding economies of scale is not persuasive . . . cost savings are frequently eroded by added expenses." When turning to districts in more urban settings, Guthrie notes the findings of Kahn and Hughes (1970), who found that administrative costs were inversely related to district enrollment. For the largest urban districts, though, the relationship is not consistent: "Administrative economies appear blurred by factors other than scale."

Whatever the prospects for administrative savings through size, the savings are not likely to be sizable. In a recent analysis of the budgets of all California school districts, the California Department of Education calculated that average expenditures equal to only 5.5% of total costs were attributable to the combined district and County Office administrative and support costs.

And whatever the evidence on which researchers predicted size economies resulting from district consolidations, there is a scarcity of proof that it has worked that way on any large scale. Real spending on K-12 education in the U.S. increased more than fourfold—after inflation (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1973, in Guthrie, 1979)—during the period when district consolidations were increasing district size one hundred and fifty fold.

SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

After cost efficiency, the most prevalent argument in support of increasing district size was that larger districts could more effectively provide educational services. Greater breadth of program, more access to specialists in instruction and support services, and higher quality of teaching and administrative personnel are among the advantages large districts have been said to enjoy (Conant, 1959; ERS, 1971; Committee on School Organization, 1973; Education Cooperative Services Unit, 1977).

BREADTH OF PROGRAM

And indeed, it is hard to dispute that a very small district may be limited in the number of educational options it can offer. Respondents surveyed in

the CSBA (1986) report listed program breadth as one of the advantages of bigness. Some reported efforts to compensate for limited offerings by specializing in an area the community particularly valued or by offering cooperative programs through intermediate units, neighboring districts, or local community colleges.

It may be fairly clear that larger districts can provide more diverse course offerings: What is less clear is the extent to which those offerings are valued or needed by the community. Monk and Haller (1986) report that in New York State high schools, enrollment for the most "expendable" courses (the ones least likely to be offered in a small or rural district) makes up only a tiny fraction of total course enrollments. They note no significant differences in overall achievement based on the availability of those courses.

In addition, as respondents to the CSBA (1986) survey note, a smaller district frequently encompasses a discrete community, with a smaller number of agendas that must be addressed. It may be much easier to be good at providing just one kind of educational program (even in a small institutional setting) than to be good at providing many kinds (even in a larger setting).

In California, the movement is towards less variety in high school course offerings, with pressure for more students to take the kind of program that would once have been called "college prep," and to define it as a "core" curriculum (Odden, 1987).

In elementary schools, of course, the typical program consists largely of self-contained classrooms where most or all of the curriculum is delivered by a generalist-teacher rather than by specialists.

ACCESS TO SPECIALISTS

Here again, there is little reason to doubt that a larger district has an advantage if its populations of special-need children are large enough to make it economical to have a staff of specialists to serve them. Likewise, efficient planning can allow a large enough district to make full use of music teachers, science specialists (even at the elementary level), art instructors, and the like. How big is big enough? The CSBA (1986) survey respondents generally expressed satisfaction with breadth of program at the levels of about 750 students enrolled in elementary districts, and at the level of about 2,500 for unified or high school districts.

Even in smaller districts, many of those surveyed felt that shared programs or carefully crafted, well-focused curricula allowed them to deliver a very high quality program.

QUALITY OF TEACHING STAFF

Although it would seem to be an important factor in determining the quality of instruction, quality of teaching staff and the effect of school district size on attractiveness of teaching jobs is an area that could benefit from further research. Monk and Haller (1986) suggest that difficulties in attracting teaching staff to live in isolated rural settings have more to do with ruralness than with the size of the employing bureaucracy.

Koppich, Gerritz, and Guthrie (1986) compared the responses of rural, suburban, and urban teachers to questions about their working conditions and job satisfaction. They found no significant differences regarding availability of supplies and equipment for the classroom or access to professional support services, such as psychologists. Of the three groups, rural teachers reported a more collegial relationship within their districts, indicating a greater likelihood that they are directly involved in curriculum planning and that they will consult with and be consulted by other teachers regarding problems with students or parents.

Organizational intimacy is one of the advantages of smallness often mentioned (Ingraham & Kenney, 1965; Webb & Ohm, 1984; CSBA, 1986; Monk & Haller, 1986). In a small district, students, parents, and teachers know each other as parts of the encompassing community. Good communication, regular interaction, and values in common (Lareau, 1987) all can contribute to a more responsive and committed approach to educating children. Benveniste (1983) suggests that large organizations containing many bureaucratic layers frequently interfere with the autonomy necessary for good teaching

When considering quality of program, it is inevitable that at some point a logical question will be asked: "If large school districts are supposed to be better, if they have so many advantages over small districts, is this superiority reflected in higher achievement levels by their students?"

Many researchers indeed have asked this question. They tend to fall into two camps: those who have found no consistent correlation between district size and student achievement, and those who have found a negative correlation—that is, a finding that achievement drops as enrollment levels rise.

Niskanen and Levy (1971) examined 144 unified California school districts, focusing on reading and math skills and correcting for I.Q. They concluded that, "School district size has a consistent negative relation to student performance and is highly significant in three out of four tests."

No correlation was found by Aikin, Benson, and Gustafson (1968) to relate either district size or financial inputs to student achievement. Bidwell

and Kasarda (1975) and Weaver (1975) also concluded that district size was not a significant predictor of achievement.

In one of the more ambitious efforts to examine this issue, Walberg and Fowler (1987) studied 507 New Jersey school districts, controlling for SES and expenditure levels. They found a slight negative correlation between district size and standardized test scores.

In an unusual approach, Friedkin and Necochea (1987) compared achievement data from the California Assessment Program with SES information for California schools and districts, and subdivided their data into geographic regions based on urban or nonurban conditions. Their hypothesis centered on the concept of interaction between opportunities presented by the factors (size, SES, area) and constraints imposed by those same factors.

Their findings were that there was no correlation or a slight positive correlation between size and achievement in medium- and high-SES populations, but that there was a strong, consistent negative correlation between district size and student achievement in low-SES populations. They conclude that the balance of opportunities versus constraints among the three factors is tipped in favor of constraints within a low socioeconomic milieu. "It appears that school system size has strong negative effects on performance [in low-SES settings] that are eliminated, but not strongly reversed, in high SES settings."

COMMUNITY IDENTITY: RIPE FOR A RESEARCH AGENDA

How does district size affect the connection a community has with its schools, the sense of ownership, and the degree of responsiveness between the district and its community?

Allocative efficiency is the ability of a service provider to provide what the recipients want to receive. This concept is closely tied to district responsiveness to community identity and community needs. Niskanen and Levy (1975) point out, "The major source of inefficiency in the supply of local government services is attributable to the supply of a uniform level of services across a jurisdiction where residents have significantly different preferences for these services. Only the creation of *smaller* (authors' emphasis) units of local government organized around communities with more homogeneous preferences for government services can reduce this loss."

As Guthrie (1979) points out, participation in the activities of a district is seldom as intense as in the activities of a particular school. Nonetheless, one

striking difference between small and large districts stands out immediately: The possibilities for contact between community members and their elected school board members can be substantially greater in a small district. The "average" school board member in the average district of fifty years ago would have represented approximately 250 constituents. Today's "average" board member represents more than 2,000 constituents. In a really large district, there might be hundreds of thousands of constituents for a board to try to please.

The board and its accessibility are part of an overall pattern of district governance and management which represent a fertile field for further research. What has been the effect of professionalization of administrators—their ascendancy to new levels of professional credentialing, training, and specialization (fueled and enabled in large part by the growth in the size of school districts)—on the levels of authority exercised by lay school boards?

What has been the effect of increasing visibility of the school board—caused by the bureaucratic growth of school districts—on the attitudes, qualifications, concerns, and behavior of elected board members? Are board members in bigger districts, who must campaign seriously to be elected, more political—in the back-room, sneaky-deal sense—than the board members in small communities? Less concerned about educational issues? More? Less knowledgeable about education? More?

Increasing the size of bureaucracies to increase their efficiency is not an idea which would gain much enthusiasm if proposed in regard to any other governmental entity. Ingraham and Kenney (1965), in one of the very few studies of actual effects of district consolidations, indicate "increases in quantities of paperwork at all levels." They identify decreased efficiency in communications. Organizational functioning styles and management techniques have an effect on teacher functioning and morale and hence on classroom operations. What has been the effect of district reorganization on children?

In spite of the great amount of research that has examined school district size, there is still room for more. Guthrie identified a series of issues which needed addressing in 1979: actual (as opposed to speculative) examinations of scale economies; political participation as related to district size; instructional quality. These issues still need to be studied. For the process of making school districts bigger in the U.S. was, as he characterized it, "One of the most awesome and least publicized governmental changes to occur in this nation during the twentieth century." This is a movement that still deserves our attention.

CONCLUSION

School districts are not what they were. They are mostly bigger now, and with being bigger has come a lot of baggage. School districts resonate to the hopes and expectations of more people, and more diverse groups of people, than ever before. They have swelled with greater numbers of children, bringing more complex needs and demands for service than ever before. They are constituted of greater numbers of employees, teachers, and administrators than has ever been the case. And their operations, programs, and services reflect the changes wrought by increasing size.

However, researchers do not express anything resembling a consensus regarding the long-term effects or organizational implications of district size. Inasmuch as not all districts have made the change, the country still has a range of kinds of districts. The one-room school still exists, though in decreasing numbers. Small, medium, and large districts flourish cheek by jowl; and for each size range some advantages and some disadvantages can be cited (sometimes even measured) by someone researching the field.

Perhaps this diversity of district type represents a strength of its own. Like the effective schools movement, the attempt to build effective districts may depend on having a variety of types to study—to design not a mold, but a model. Can we have the intimacy of a small district, the broad course offerings of a large district, sound management (at any district size) leading to good planning, careful use of resources, value for the tax money spent?

For the results of research to be as equivocal as they are, the truth must be that there is no one right answer. Perhaps, as Friedkin and Necochea suggest, the improvements which were anticipated to follow district consolidations depend on other factors in addition to size. Perhaps, as Monk and Haller aver, every district has to figure out its own equation of opportunities, constraints, economies, and diseconomies in order to just say yes to its own best way to operate.

If so, then a clearer picture of the effects of organizational scale on the operations of school districts could only be for the good.

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