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Bigger is not always better

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Review

Bigger is not always better

Jonathan P. Sher and Rachel B. Tompkins, *Economy, Efficiency, and Equality: The Myths of Rural School and District Consolidation* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, July, 1976). 39 pp.

Another educational truism is being attacked, and according to the evidence cited in this monograph by Sher and Tompkins, rightfully so. Just as the nation is coming to grips with the fact that a basic education isn't so bad after all, and at a time when school planners are told that environment may not be as fundamental to learning as they have been led to believe, comes a claim that the consolidation movement, with us since 1930, has **not** proven that bigger is necessarily better. Indeed, the authors of this monograph go so far as to refer to the theory of economy of scale as a "myth" and to proceed to attack the myth from every front.

Economy of scale, the reduction of unit costs as size increases, has been long and widely accepted in business and agriculture. Research demonstrating greater economies and improved management of larger schools has failed to acknowledge accompanying, offsetting "diseconomies of scale." The authors attribute this diseconomy to "new and enlarged costs attributable to increased size of operations." These new costs include additional capital expenditures, salaries, and increased operating costs for transportation required by consolidation. Even savings accrued by volume purchasing are negated by the increased cost of distributing the purchases to participating districts. The authors point out that "the point is not that economies of scale are non-existent in rural education, but rather that they must be considered in conjunction with existing diseconomies."

The "illusion of economy" is discredited by research which demonstrates that larger schools attract a professional staff with high credentials and higher salary requirements. Larger schools also purchase items not normally found in small schools. Often the pupil-teacher ratio must be raised in order to even approximate the level of operating expenses found in smaller schools. Taking these facts into consideration, the authors conclude that "it is simply incorrect to assert that consolidation is synonymous with economy."

One of the strongest points scored in this work is the attack on the concept that consolidation results in greater efficiency by making it possible to spend less in a district to attain the same level of performance. However, the result of consolidation is often to spend less to attain less. The authors cite the example of increased efficiency in the use of administrators. A small school of three hundred students with one superintendent is hardly less efficient than a large consolidated district with one superintendent serving fifty or more towns. The theory of economy of scale was originally intended to apply to **products**. "Applying this argument to **people** undermines the assumption of consistent quality, and invalidates the use of this concept in arguing for administrative efficiency."

Most people who have attended a small rural high school would agree with the findings of a study of Kansas schools conducted by Barker and Gump as cited in this monograph:

"The actual proportion of students who can participate in the essential activities which support the academic program, the quality of that involvement, and the satisfaction with that involvement, clearly favor the smaller community over the larger consolidated school."

In other words, a student in a small school has a greater opportunity for leadership involvements and extracurricular participation in such activities as music, dramatics, journalism, and student government. Even though small schools offer fewer academic specialties, more students can participate in non-academic subjects such as music, ship, arts, and physical education.

If the evidence against the "bigger is better" concept is so strong, why then has the concept been so widely and unquestioningly accepted? The author cites several social factors responsible for this phenomena such as modernization of government, the increased prestige attributed to the profession of school administration, and financial incentives offered to those districts accepting consolidation. Added to these factors is the fact that "the arguments for consolidation have tremendous face validity." It is difficult to argue with "obvious" economies of scale, and the advantages of newer, more modern schools. Finally educational outcomes are notoriously difficult to measure. For that reason, research into consolidation was conducted "in order to convince others to believe in consolidation, rather than to find some objective truth."

What are the alternatives to consolidation? The authors list several such as paying more attention to small schools. The possibility of bringing students to the resources rather than vice versa is an attractive alternative. Above all, any research demonstrating the value of proposed reforms should be more closely examined. The authors are openly honest in admitting that their stand has not yet been fully researched. If further research is needed in this area, educators should be demanding it.

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