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Super Schools ... are they?



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Super Schools ... are they?

By David Knuckey

Three years ago the Education Minister Jane Lomax-Smith announced what became known as Super Schools; the Rann Government's plan to modernise school buildings. From this day on, the Government spoke about three clear benefits:

- Bigger schools means more subject choice
- Better Infrastructure - some of our schools weren't even built with air-conditioning, let alone to house modern IT cabling
- Super Schools achieve economies of scale – for you and me, more kids per school is cheaper.

Two things that weren't discussed about Super Schools:

- Do we want them?
- Besides the SACE subjects on offer, are bigger schools better for the children?

Question 1: Do we want them?

There was initial support; it was exciting and they would be all shiny and new.

The recent events in Whyalla, Port Pirie and Port Augusta, however, reveal a different attitude toward either the concept of Super Schools, or toward the Rann Government's handling of the 'consultation'.

“... it is unsettling that fundamental reform movements such as amalgamation or closure, of smaller schools be established on the grounds of cost efficiency or academic achievement, which is only one of the many dimensions of schooling.”

SAASSO has heard from representatives of a number of schools in this region and they relayed consistent objections:

- Parents felt they were being 'herded' into Super Schools by the Rann Government, as part of a cash grab.
- Parents simply did not receive enough information on what the schools would be like. As the chairperson of one Governing Council put it, 'We were getting plenty of answers ... just not to the questions we were asking'.

Question 2: Are bigger schools better for your children?

We are told there will be more SACE subjects on offer and yes they will be state of the art buildings, but is that enough to guarantee improved education for your children and outweigh the many potential (and it's claimed there are many) detrimental effects of large schools?

Or is it just about economies of scale?

There is strong argument that there exist numerous aspects to the quality of school life - for both teachers and students - that are simply superior in small schools. On the following pages, we précis two education research papers which discuss these factors. >



Super Schools ... are they?

Study One

Brian Caldwell is the former Dean of Education at the University of Melbourne and the University of Tasmania. His 'Research On School Size Briefing Paper', is a damning indictment of the Super School mentality; which even questions the cost-effectiveness of large schools:

"The view that large schools are more cost-effective than small schools has been challenged. An increasing number of school systems have implemented a strategy to maintain or create small schools or restructure large schools to form schools-within-schools. Perhaps the largest cross-system initiative is the project of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that provided nearly \$500 million to create new small high schools."

A smaller percentage of students drop out of small schools than large ones.

Professor Caldwell's paper summarises the work compiled by the North West Regional Education Laboratory, which he claims is the most comprehensive of its kind, 'drawing on 49 primary sources.' The conclusions drawn question the benefit of closing small schools in favour of Super Schools:

- There is no clear agreement as to what constitutes a 'small' school or a 'large' school. Many researchers, however, indicate that an appropriate and effective school size is 300-400 students for a primary school and 400-800 students for a high school.
- Much school consolidation has been based on the beliefs that larger schools are less expensive to operate and have higher-quality curricula than small schools. Research has demonstrated, however, that neither of these assertions is necessarily true.
- Academic achievement in small schools is at least equal to – and often superior – to that of large schools.
- Student attitudes toward school in general and toward particular school subjects are more positive in small schools.
- Student social behaviour – as measured by truancy, discipline problems, violence, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation – is more positive in small schools.
- Levels of extracurricular participation are much higher and more varied in small schools than in large ones, and students in small schools derive greater satisfaction from their extracurricular participation.
- Student attendance is better in small schools than in large ones.

- A smaller percentage of students drop out of small schools than large ones.
- Students have a greater sense of belonging in small schools than in large ones.
- Student academic and general self-concepts are higher in small schools than in large ones.
- Interpersonal relations between and among students, teachers and administration are more positive in small schools than in large ones.
- Students from small and large high schools do not differ from one another on college-related variables such as

entrance exam scores, acceptance rates, attendance, grade point average and completion.

- Teacher attitudes toward their work and administrators are more positive in small schools than large ones.
- Poor students and those of racial and ethnic minorities are more adversely affected – academically, attitudinally and behaviourally – by attending large schools than are other students.

Researchers identified the attributes which account for the 'superiority' of small schools over their larger counterparts:

- Everyone's participation is needed to populate the school's offices, teams, clubs etc. so a far smaller percentage of students is overlooked or alienated.
- Adults and students in the school know and care about one another to a greater degree than is possible in large schools.
- Small schools have a higher rate of parental involvement.
- Student and staff generally have a stronger sense of personal efficacy in small schools.
- Students in small schools take more responsibility for their own learning; their learning activities are more often individualised, experiential, and relevant to the world outside of school.
- Grouping and instructional strategies associated with higher student performance are more often implemented in small schools – team teaching, integrated curriculum, multi-age grouping, cooperative learning, and performance assessments.

Study Two

Magdalena Mok (Macquarie University) and Marcellin Flynn (Australian Catholic University) take a different approach to ‘assessing’ school size in their paper (published in *Issues in Educational Research*). In their introduction, Mok and Flynn point to issues beyond cost-effectiveness and student test scores which also have a dramatic effect on students and teachers in the small vs. large school debate.

“... it is unsettling that fundamental reform movements such as amalgamation or closure, of smaller schools be established on the grounds of cost efficiency or academic achievement, which is only one of the many dimensions of schooling”.

Quoting McGaw, they argue that, “Learning and the love of learning; personal development and self-esteem; life skills, problem solving and learning how to learn; the development of independent thinkers and well rounded confident individuals all ranked as highly as the outcomes of effective schooling as success in the narrow range of academic disciplines”.

The authors state that, “a school is a community of people who come together in pursuit of a common goal – the development of the physical, intellectual, vocational, social, emotional, aesthetic and moral dimensions of the young person; it is necessary to discern not only the impact of school size on academic outcome but also the effect of school size on other facets of school life.”

“In contrast, a small school tends to facilitate personal interaction and social intimacy. Teachers in small schools are more likely to feel satisfied about their work than their counterparts in larger schools.”

Mok and Flynn cite a plethora of studies in their *Literature Review*, which support small schools as the better education model. Below are excerpts from this discussion:

Bourke supports this assertion stating that, “Quality of school life has been accorded special significance by educators because it is viewed as important in its own right and because of the relationship between students’ quality of school life and their academic achievement”.

Mok and Flynn state that school size influences quality of school life in a complex fashion and at least two opposing sets of forces are at work, one of which is economic and the other social.

“It is claimed and accepted by many that there are financial benefits to larger schools and that a flow-on educational benefit is the broader curriculum – obviously, this is then only a benefit if student satisfaction is linked to the breadth and depth of the formal school curriculum. It is certainly plausible that a very limited choice of subjects could lead to student dissatisfaction.”

The authors cite several studies which offer other factors beyond school size which have curriculum implications:

- Social class of the school
- School Governance
- School location
- Unionisation

The authors argue that the economies of scale benefits of large schools may be counter-balanced by opposing forces which adversely affect the school community:

“At the administrative level, larger schools are found to have more centralized decision-making, lower levels of staff cooperation, more formal modes of communication, more extensive bureaucratisation and a higher level of work specialisation.”

“In contrast, a small school tends to facilitate personal interaction and social intimacy. Teachers in small schools are more likely to feel satisfied about their work than their counterparts in larger schools.”

On the student-benefit dimension, smaller schools are found to have:

- associations with higher and more socially equitable engagement
- more opportunities for developing leadership potential
- better school discipline
- better school climate
- better student attitudes
- lower school dropout rates

Conclusion

Investment in education; in all forms including infrastructure is welcome and an absolute necessity; but is building fewer, larger schools the best form of investment? ■