

Size Matters: The Difference Between Big and Small Schools

“Supersize me!” While this approach may be a deal in the world of fast food, is it equally effective in education? Or is there something to be said for the iconic one-room schoolhouse of the 19th century? No real concurrence exists on optimal school size, and both small and large schools offer experiences that can add to your child’s academic experience.



Good Things Come in Small Packages: What’s So Great About Small Schools?

It’s a matter of logic: smaller schools typically have smaller classes, and low teacher-student ratios translate into more focus on your child and his education. From a cognitive standpoint, scaling back class size is good because it offers the opportunity to delve deeper into the curriculum and move through it at a faster pace. In fact, many studies show improvement in instructional quality and academic success at small schools. It’s equally beneficial from a social standpoint—fewer students in the room make class participation inescapable, but also usually less intimidating. The size of such schools actually promotes belongingness; it becomes difficult for kids to go unnoticed and slip through the proverbial cracks. The Chicago Public School system small schools website puts it this way: “Smaller numbers of students, a more intimate and personalized learning environment, and a cohesive vision among teachers characterize small schools.”

Smaller schools operate more like a community than a corporation. They frequently have a greater sense of unity, especially if they are built around a particular belief system (religious, educational, cultural, philosophical, etc.) shared by the parents and faculty alike. Another reason for this close-knit feel is that there are often more opportunities for kids to participate. Take, for example, a typical high school sports team. In a big school, competition is fierce for a coveted few spots; those students who make the team gain a personal investment in the school, while those who don’t make the roster—and their families, by extension—may walk away feeling marginalized. In smaller schools the chance for student participation is recurrently higher because students are required rather than redundant; as a result, children in smaller schools and their families have more of a stake in their school.

Larger than Life: What’s So Great About Big Schools?

On the other hand, larger schools can be equally advantageous for different reasons. One of the primary arguments for large schools is the curricular diversity, or variety of classes, they offer. While small schools may only be economically equipped to offer Spanish, for instance, larger schools might offer instruction in Japanese, German and French as well, or offer more opportunities for gifted education, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate coursework. Large schools generally have more to offer students in the way of extracurricular activities too. Take, for example, G. Holmes Braddock Senior High School in Dade County, Florida. Over 4500 students strong, it boasts more than 60 clubs and activities that range from salsa dance to Amnesty International—and that’s not even counting their sports programs. This large school also delivers on academics, ranking within *Newsweek*’s top 5% of high schools in the U.S. for its graduation rate and Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate test scores. Big schools are also succeeding at the elementary level. Grenada Elementary School in Grenada, Mississippi, has a Kidzeum for their 1800 K-3 students. The Kidzeum, “the first full-scale school-based children’s museum,” according to the Grenada website, has been honored by *Business Week* and *American School Board Journal* for excellence in education. Clearly, big things are happening at big schools.

Big schools also tend to have more diversity in their student body. A varied representation of ethnicities, creeds and races at a school can mean more multiethnic, philosophical and interracial dialog. Historically, the benefits of racial and ethnic diversity in education have been viewed in this way, as explained in 2007 by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights: “Recent studies have shown that students of all racial or ethnic groups who attend more diverse schools have a higher comfort level with members of racial and ethnic groups different than their own, an increased sense of civic awareness, and a greater desire to live and work in multiracial settings relative to their segregated peers.” As we move toward a more global marketplace, this ease with diversity can benefit kids in both their future personal and business relationships.

Size alone does not determine a school’s success, but it certainly can be a contributing factor to the success of your child. Whether big or small, embrace what your child’s school has to offer and make the most of the upcoming school year.