

ED296815 1987-11-00 Small Catholic Elementary Schools: An Endangered Species? ERIC Digest.

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TEXT: WHAT IS A SMALL CATHOLIC SCHOOL?

In practical terms, a Catholic school is small when students in two or more grades share the same instructional setting. Within this digest, the small Catholic school will be considered to be an elementary school with an enrollment of 100 or less. To be financially viable, a small school must recognize its smallness and seek structures and methods appropriate to its size.

WHERE ARE THE SMALL CATHOLIC SCHOOLS?

A recent Small Schools Survey (Reck, in press) found that 462 Catholic elementary schools in the United States enrolled fewer than 100 students in 8-grade schools, or under 12.5 students per grade in schools with fewer than 8 grades. Over three fourths of these schools are located in only 13 states.

HOW DO SMALL CATHOLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS FARE ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT TESTS?

Many persons still remember the argument for public school consolidation in the 1950s and 1960s: "bigger is better." Recent educational research shows, on the contrary, that size by itself does not indicate the quality of a school (Marshall, 1984) and that small schools can and do achieve as well (Alberta Department of Education, 1984; Sher and Tompkins, 1977; Eberts, 1984; ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1982).

The Small Schools Survey of Catholic elementary schools (Reck, in press) indicates that 94% of the composite class averages are on or above grade level. Moreover, the median class average on the composite achievement score increases through the grades--with the eighth grade composite score 1.8 years above the national norm. In other words, the longer a class studies in a small Catholic school, the higher the group tends to score above the expected level.

The greater-than-expected achievement is also evident in the subtest to measure reading, with 92% of the reading class averages on or above grade level. Again the median class average increases through the grades, with the eighth grade composite score 1.8 years above the national norm. Reference skills scores are even higher, with 96% of the class averages in this subtest on or above the grade level. The median class averages range from 1.5 to 2.0 grades above the national norm. Mathematics results are also significantly above expected norms with 87% of the mathematics class averages on or above grade level. The median class averages range from .4 grade above the norm in the primary grades, to 1.8 grades above expected scoring in the eighth grade.

DO THE SMALL CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OFFER ANY OTHER ACADEMIC ADVANTAGES?

Following the Small Schools Survey, Project Co-Directors Suzanne Hall and Carleen Reck conducted five regional meetings with principals who had responded to the survey and whose schools modeled above-average academic achievement. The sites of the meetings approximated the location of most small Catholic schools. The 47 principals, representing over a thousand years' experience in small Catholic schools, consistently gave examples of the following academic advantages:

--Varied materials and tasks. Because fewer students are working on the same learning objective, they have more access to the available variety of multi-sensory materials. The manipulatives, for example, that would ordinarily be shared by 20 classmates are divided among

--Higher levels of thinking. In higher-level thinking, the questions are generally short and answers long--a perfect combination for the teacher with a small number of students (and papers) at one level. According to the Small School Study participants, a higher-than-average percentage of teachers in multi-grade situations assign tasks that are open-ended rather than simple fill-in-the-blank worksheets. Their assignments tend to push students beyond factual knowledge to higher levels of thinking and beyond the textbook to a variety of reference materials.

--Opportunities for participation. Although large schools may offer a broad spectrum of mini-courses and educational activities, the chance for a student to participate in these activities decreases as the school size increases. In the small school, students have greater opportunities to participate in the coveted computer course, or the woodworking or quilting mini-course.

--Study habits. In multi-grade situations, students must work without direct teacher assistance for a significant part of the school day. As a result, students have frequent opportunities to follow directions, complete a task by themselves, and work for sustained periods without interruptions. As a result, these students are likely to develop the ability to concentrate and work independently; moreover, they have regular opportunities to learn that they are able to meet challenges if they keep working.

WHAT OTHER ADVANTAGES ARE COMMON TO THESE SMALL SCHOOLS?

Participants in the Small Schools Study regional sessions were unanimous about two other advantages:

--Community support. In an era when youngsters often lack the support of two parents, the small school is a place where students know each other by name, the setting tends to be personalized, youngsters of different ages can associate with each other without seeming out of place, and children are at ease talking with adults. In the Catholic school which emphasizes the building of faith community, the total group can easily participate in prayer and liturgical expressions of faith and community-building activities.

--Opportunities for leadership. The fact that the same number of responsibilities and offices as in a large school awaits a smaller number of students means that the students at a small school have more opportunities to develop leadership and personal maturity. In many small schools, for example, students teach each other computer skills and serve as trouble shooters--tasks often relegated to an aide in a larger setting.

WHAT SCHOOL-WIDE ORGANIZATIONAL ELEMENTS ARE MOST EFFECTIVE?

According to the small school principals in the regional sessions, the most effective--and essential--elements are:

--Team concept. Although the principal remains the visible leader in the community, the teaching principal will necessarily share many administrative tasks with the teachers. For this to work, the principal will hold frequent brief sessions (e.g., five minutes every morning) with all teachers to keep everyone involved and informed.

--Priorities. When one sets school goals, much emphasis is placed on skills needed in multi-grade settings; e.g., reading and study skills.

--Schoolwide skill organization. For a teacher to keep track of one grade's objectives in all skill subjects is sufficient challenge. When two or three grades' objectives are included in the task, some clear system of recording basic skills (preferably on a school-wide basis) can assure that each student is progressing steadily in areas such as reading, mathematics, and language arts. This system can suggest the best groupings--often across grades--for instruction in skill areas.

--Plan for content subjects. Some schoolwide systems determine 2- or 3-year cycles for content areas such as religion, social studies, science, music, and art. With such a plan, each classroom treats certain key areas each year--with expectations adjusted to student experience; e.g., Science Year 1: rocks, minerals, magnetism, space, solar systems, climate; Year 2: forces (gravity, friction, energy, weather, etc.), sound, light, acids; Year 3: water, air, land forms, plants, animals, health. By the final grade, each student has met all key areas in each subject.

--Interdisciplinary approach. Because they have less direct instructional time than the typical teacher, teachers in small schools tend to use their instructional time for dual purposes; e.g., using literature to teach American history, or graphs to introduce scientific information.

--Instructional assistance. To supplement the limited teacher-student time, schoolwide plans include at least one means of instructional assistance; e.g., peer tutoring, collegiate or senior volunteer aides, self-correcting learning materials, computer-assisted instruction, video presentations, etc.

WHAT CONTRIBUTES MOST TO EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM TEACHING IN THESE SMALL SCHOOLS?

The principals participating in the regional meetings reached agreement on the importance of the following factors for teachers in small schools: --Knowledge of key concepts and skills --Individualization --Room arrangement --Assignment boards or pockets to help groups or individual students stay on task with little direct teacher guidance. --Some system for student correction of daily work which allows the rapid feedback necessary for learning during practice; e.g., available answer keys or

assigned student correctors. A place for correcting work which is separate from the place for completing work can assist this process. --Teaching stations which allow the teacher to observe all areas of the room and occasionally walk around observing student work, while still maintaining contact with the focal group. --Charts or another system for indicating completed tasks and collection baskets which allow for a sense of completion for the student and an opportunity for perusal by the teacher. --Areas where pairs or small groups can work without disturbing others and where extroverts can use their preferred learning styles during part of their long work periods--all within view of the teacher.

HOW CAN THE SMALL CATHOLIC SCHOOL GENERATE MORE SUPPORT?

The fact that the small Catholic school tends to be located within the small town can be a genuine asset: word spreads quickly there. Some steps to help save this endangered species are: --share simple but clear evidence--bolstered with concrete evidence of excellence in the specific school--that small has many advantages over big in schooling; --plan ways in which the school can become the education opportunity center for parishioners and other supporters--e.g., by offering a computer center, a preschool, extended care, etc.; --reach out to the town's worthy causes and show concern for those in need; --constantly communicate about student learning and achievement; --provide regular, clear statements of costs and specific needs.

All in all, an awareness of the endangered status of the small Catholic school--as well as its advantages, achievements, and methods for effective operation--can help to save it from the threat of extinction.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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