ED401090 1996-12-00 Curriculum Adequacy and Quality in High Schools Enrolling Fewer Than 400 Pupils (9-12). ERIC Digest.

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Curriculum Adequacy and Quality in High Schools Enrolling Fewer Than 400 Pupils (9-12). ERIC Digest.

One widely recognized challenge facing small schools is their ability to maintain a broad curriculum with a diversity of course offerings. By contrast, one of the alleged benefits of "bigness" is breadth of the core curriculum, vocational offerings, special services, and extracurricular opportunities. Evidence presented in this Digest will illustrate that many small high schools maintain programs in these areas that are comparable in quality to curricula of larger schools. In cases where deficiencies have existed, many small schools have achieved curricular adequacy through various restructuring efforts, including integration of curricula, innovative scheduling, higher education cooperatives, interdistrict sharing, and use of instructional technologies.

What do we mean by "small"? While there is no accepted definition of the "small" high school, institutions enrolling fewer than 400 pupils in grades 9-12 (100 students per graduating class) are generally considered small. In 1993-94, approximately one out of every three public high schools in the United States fell into this size category (NCES, 1995, see table at end of Digest).

CORE CURRICULUM

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education asserted that high school students should complete a core curriculum that includes 4 years of English, 3 years of social studies, 3 years of science, 3 years of mathematics, 2 years of a foreign language, and 1/2 year of computer science. Legislatures and state education agencies quickly responded to this call for action, and over 40 states increased their graduation requirements by the turn of the decade (Coley, 1994). The new regulations posed special challenges to some small high schools, requiring them to expand course offerings.

Researchers have found, however, that core curricular offerings in small high school settings overall are well aligned with national goals (Barker, 1985). Moreover, Haller, Monk, Spotted Bear, Griffith, and Moss (1990) found that high schools enrolling as few as 100 to 200 students offer base courses in core curricular areas such as mathematics and science at rates comparable to high schools enrolling between 1,200 and 1,600 students.

Another common concern regarding the core curriculum in small high schools is the

availability of advanced courses, such as calculus and advanced placement English. While researchers have found that there is less incidence of advanced courses in the smallest high schools (Haller et al., 1990), large size is no guarantee that such courses will be offered or that student enrollments in these courses will be high (Monk, 1986).

VOCATIONAL OFFERINGS, SPECIAL SERVICES, AND EXTRACURRICULAR

OPPORTUNITIESAnother alleged benefit of large-scale high schools is their ability to support a breadth of vocational offerings, specialized services, and extracurricular opportunities. Research on the relationship between school size and these areas of the curriculum has produced mixed results. Although larger high schools do tend to offer a broader array of courses in occupational and technical education, smaller high schools appear to offer more favorable proportions of vocational offerings per student (Ramirez, 1989). Economies of scale are likely to allow larger high schools to offer more specialized services to students with disabilities and special needs. Many smaller school systems seem able to combat this potential problem through shared programs and well-focused curricula (Webb, 1989).

Extracurricular opportunities in small high schools are less extensive than in large high schools. Small high schools have fewer clubs and athletic teams and may not support full orchestras or marching bands. Nevertheless, student participation rates are greater in smaller high schools than in larger high schools and individual students in smaller settings are involved in a greater diversity of activities (Schoggen & Schoggen, 1988).

ENHANCING CURRICULUM OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL HIGH SCHOOLS

While this evidence of high participation rates is encouraging to proponents of small high schools, the pressure to expand educational opportunities for students in low enrollment settings remains. There are several "in-house" options for expanding educational opportunities in small schools, such as integrated curricula and innovative scheduling. An integrated or fused curriculum attempts to reduce the number of separate subjects through interdisciplinary courses. This "less is more" philosophy is consistent with the curriculum reform espoused by Ted Sizer and the Coalition of Essential Schools, and often involves scheduling students in longer blocks of time than the traditional 45- to 50-minute periods (Sizer, 1993).

Although difficult to develop and maintain, interdistrict pooling of instructional resources and the use of distance education and other technologies can serve to broaden educational opportunities for students in small schools. Collaboration and sharing among schools and school districts is particularly common in efforts to expand vocational and special services curricula. Advances in computer and video technologies

have permitted many rural school districts to electronically import courses otherwise unavailable in the school system at a cost of one third to one half of a resident teacher's salary (Smith, 1990). Computerized learning programs, interactive television, and Internet access are additional resources that can enhance the curriculum of small high schools. Success has been reported in using these technologies to provide advanced placement and college credit courses as well as instructional services for students with special needs (Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands, 1994).

CURRICULUM ADEQUACY THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING

While certainly a laudable goal and an important measure of curriculum quality, curriculum breadth says little about the actual delivery of educational services to students and does not assess the extent to which students are actively participating in a high school's instructional program. This discrepancy between the presence of curricular opportunities and the willingness or ability of students to take advantage of these opportunities is important to consider when gauging overall curriculum quality. High schools, large and small, face the challenge of designing, organizing, and implementing curricula that engage students in the learning process and motivate them to meet high standards of academic achievement. Lee and colleagues (1995) provide guidance in this area, as they have found three curricular components common to high schools that have successfully restructured their instructional programs.

1. A common academic curriculum. Student achievement gains were found in schools with a common academic curriculum, where course offerings are narrow and academic content is strong.

2. High levels of academic press. This curriculum expectation centers on the notion that all students will meet high academic standards and devote considerable effort to academic endeavors.

3. Authentic instruction. Students are engaged in sustained, disciplined, and critical thought through a variety of instructional approaches, such as independent study, project-based learning, and real-world problem solving.

SMALL HIGH SCHOOLS: PROMISING SITES FOR

CURRICULUM CHANGE

Proponents of small high schools have claimed for many years that lower enrollments allow for the engaging and meaningful kind of instructional program described above. Small schools, for example, are often credited with stimulating innovations such as multiage classrooms, peer tutoring, and individualized instruction. Support for small-scale schooling has been derived largely from rural communities, where the vast majority of small public high schools exist. Recent reform efforts in urban areas, however, have sparked a great deal of interest in understanding how reducing the size and scope of schooling operations might facilitate constructive curriculum change within large city school systems. For example, Deborah Meier, director of the innovative Central Park East Secondary School in East Harlem, has identified six central service delivery benefits associated with small-scale schooling (Meier, 1995): (1) feasibility of democratic practices; (2) collective accountability of faculty performance; (3) personal and individualized attention to student needs; (4) safe, orderly learning environments; (5) parental access to school leadership; and (6) connections between adult and student cultures. These features promote the development of a curriculum that is attentive and responsive to community and student needs. Others have argued that it is exactly these features that make small schools the ideal site for curriculum reform efforts (Unks, 1989).

Small high school size does not, in and of itself, guarantee a high quality curriculum; it does appear to facilitate its development. Proponents of reducing the size and scope of schooling operations are careful to point out that structural change (e.g., creating smaller schools, schools-within-schools, house plans, etc.) will not succeed in improving curricular opportunities for students without a committed group of teachers, a supportive (and perhaps independent) administration, a more flexible central authority, and adequate resources (Lee et al., 1995; Meier, 1995; Raywid, 1996).

Practitioners, researchers, and policy makers continue to struggle with the question, "How big does a high school have to be to offer a comprehensive curriculum?" A seemingly more relevant question may be, "What are the conditions that facilitate curricular adequacy and quality within all high schools?" It seems clear that as the educational community attempts to answer this question, the structural feature of school size will be central to the discussion.

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