

Small Schools

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School Size: Does it Matter?

There are all sorts of Ministry of Education "initiatives" currently going on around the country which amount to intentions for closing, consolidating, merging, or amalgamating small schools. Then there are also Ministry of Education counter initiatives that promote the establishment of new kinds of bigger, brighter, better brain-child schools, like Southern Cross 'Campus' in South Auckland – the one stop shop for little children at Year 1 through to post-pubescents at Year 13 (14, 15, 16, ...)!

Without question, the Ministry has a legitimate role in examining and reviewing the structure of schools. But the whole affair becomes contentious and incredulous when official or officials' declarations of motive are centred on generalised claims that bigger is better, particularly for student achievement. We all know through our various contacts that some bigger schools *are* appearing to perform better than some little schools. We also know that the opposite is equally true. Some little schools are clearly appearing to outperform some bigger schools. No question about it! All of these assertions, however, beg definition of what constitutes "performing better". Even more elusive is access to credible comparative measures that provide fair and balanced information which would allow a trustworthy judgement of relative performance between schools of different (or similar) sizes and locations. Any such measures, of course, would be dubious if they failed to provide rich information – which clearly doesn't come from things like standardised test scores.

The truth of the matter is that a wide variety of characteristics determine school performance, and no one characteristic on its own gives an absolute measure. We do, however, have empirical evidence (that is, from extensive research) that school size in itself is not a reliable predictor of student achievement. In New Zealand, the National Education Monitoring Project, year after year, subject after subject, has substantially dismissed the generalised claim (myth) that bigger is better.

It may well be that students attending a particular large school in a particular location could achieve better if they attended a particular smaller school in a particular location, or vice versa. But that is likely to reflect current arrangements and ease of access to those particular schools rather than the size of the schools per se!

Putting student achievement aside, there are rational and legitimate arguments for closing, consolidating, merging, or amalgamating schools in some locations around New Zealand. Our demography has changed. Our economy has changed. Communications (transport, etc.) have changed. Ways of doing business have changed. But equally there is a force of counter-argument which has a legitimate role in challenging and resisting change. Each position reflects the nature and priorities of the constituency it represents, and the perceived benefits or damage to their respective interests.

Ministry of Education initiatives turn sour when individuals and communities begin to mistrust their processes. If they are told at the outset that the process is intended to "explore" possibilities through a localised consultative, collaborative, partnership (for goodness sake!), members of communities will always interpret that to mean that one option is the status quo! If they are told from the outset that the status quo is not an option or that a school or schools are going to be closed, then that's a different matter again. But unless there is circumstantial, demonstrable evidence that children are being educationally disadvantaged under present conditions which justifies the closure of particular schools, then don't use this as an argument. It simply doesn't wash anymore. And if told that there is a bigger, brighter, better, brain-child school up the road which is a shining model, ask for a look at it to see for yourself how it's going. You might be surprised!

All schools for miles and miles around

Must take a special test

To see who's learning such and such –

To see which school's the best.

If our small school does not do well,

Then it will be torn down,

And you will have to go to school

In dreary Flobbertown.

Dr Seuss (1995). Hooray for Diffendoofer Day!

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