

“Everyone Matters Here”: Alabama’s Small Schools

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Editor’s note: Governor Riley is proposing a bond issue of more than \$750 million for school construction. As the Legislature debates this proposal and school officials envision how they might use the funds, it’s important for lawmakers, educators and voters to consider the impact of school size on student achievement. ACPP has partnered with the Rural School and Community Trust to produce this overview of national research on the educational and economic advantages of small schools.

What is a small school?

School size classifications vary, but schools with two or fewer classrooms or homerooms per grade share a number of advantages that set them apart as “small schools.” By this definition, Alabama has more than 250 small public schools, including some 120 high schools classified as 1A and 2A in the state’s athletic system. Most of Alabama’s small schools are in rural communities, and many serve all grades, K-12.

Perhaps the most striking general characteristic of small schools is the ease with which students, their families, teachers, administrators and staff can know each other. Students at these schools often describe them as “a family” and observe that “everyone matters here,” and “I’m not just a number.” As a result, individual students are less likely to get lost in the crowd. And teachers are better able to tailor instruction and support to individual needs.

Learning in a small school

Within this broad web of supportive relationships, research has identified a number of particular advantages of small school size. These include:

- **Stronger academic achievement** – Students in small schools achieve at higher levels than students in larger schools, when comparison is controlled for socio-economic status. Low-income students perform significantly better in small schools, which helps reduce the *achievement gap* in test scores. Small schools have better attendance rates on average and tend to enroll higher percentages of students in advanced classes. Distance learning technologies – such as those offered through Alabama’s *ACCESS* program – enable students, no matter where they live, to take a full range of classes. All of our small public high schools offer a strong core curriculum, advanced courses and electives, in compliance with the state’s strict curriculum requirements.
- **Higher graduation rates** – Small schools do a better job of keeping students in school. An analysis of Alabama’s high schools found that the state’s smallest public high schools keep a much higher percentage of students in school through 12th grade than larger schools – 77 percent for small schools, compared to 66 percent for large rural schools and 69.5 percent across the state. This means that there would be 4,000 more Alabama 12th graders if the state as a whole kept students in school as effectively as its smallest high schools. What’s more, Alabama’s smallest public schools eliminated the gap between the rates at which White and African American students stay in school. Small schools achieved this distinction despite much higher poverty rates, which increase the overall risk of dropping out.
- **Broader student participation** – Research shows that students who participate in school activities have better attendance and behavior, higher achievement and higher self-esteem. Students at small schools are much more likely to reap the benefits of participation than students who attend larger schools. For one thing, with a smaller pool to draw from, each activity at a small school depends on a higher proportion of students to sustain it. Students at small schools are also more likely to participate in multiple activities – the football team *and* the newspaper, for example, or the school play *and* track. School consolidation can shrink student opportunities dramatically. In addition to the larger pool and more competitive selection, long bus rides to and from consolidated schools make it hard for many students to take part in any activities beyond regular school hours.
- **A safer environment** – The National Center for Education Statistics has found that schools with more than 1,000 students are eight times more likely to report a serious violent incident than schools with fewer than 300 students. In addition, students in small schools report greater satisfaction with school and more positive attention from adults, which fosters healthy behaviors and reduces unhealthy ones, such as substance abuse.
- **Stronger parent and community involvement** – Effective schools generally enjoy high levels of

parent involvement and local support. Small schools have the advantage of being close enough to home for families, friends and community residents to participate in school activities. This critical engagement drops dramatically when schools are removed from the local community.

Economic factors

Closing small schools doesn't save money.

Supporters of consolidation often cite projected savings as a rationale for closing schools, but post-consolidation research consistently finds that costs remain the same or rise. New expenses for transportation, student safety and other services offset any savings in per-pupil instruction costs. Research also finds that it costs about the same per student to build schools of any size, making it as economical to build several small schools as it is to build one large facility.

In addition, small schools distributed throughout a district help the economy, especially in rural areas.

Studies show that rural communities with schools have higher housing and property values, more self-employed workers, and lower poverty rates than similar communities without schools. Maintaining a school in the community helps families maintain economic security, which is better for student achievement. Finally, young people who achieve at higher levels and finish high school are more likely to become productive citizens. Closing small schools and building large schools to replace them makes little economic sense for either the short or the long term.

Supporting small schools

Consolidation fails to address the basic problems of struggling small schools.

It does not generate new resources or different teachers for the school system. Instead, consolidation poses additional barriers to achievement and success for struggling students. The negative side effects of eliminating schools through consolidation ripple through the economy of the entire state.

Policy recommendations:

- Funding for school construction and renovation should encourage small schools and include targeted funding for small schools in low-wealth school systems. Construction funding should not encourage school consolidation.
- Distance learning technologies and training (such as those offered through Alabama's *ACCESS* program) deserve strong support in both school policy and the state budget.

- School reform initiatives should build on the strengths of small schools and protect these schools as valuable educational, cultural and economic assets to Alabama.

Resources

The Rural School and Community Trust is a national nonprofit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving communities. The Rural Trust's Web site, www.ruraledu.org, offers a range of general information and research reports on small schools, including the following, searchable by title:

- "The Hobbit Effect" summarizes research literature that explains why "small" works in schooling and identifies ten attributes of small schools that promote student success.
- "The Fiscal Impacts of School Consolidation" is a brief compendium of research on how school closure and consolidation affect actual education spending.
- "Alabama's Small Rural High Schools Close Persistence Gap" examines the issue here at home.

Knowledge-Works Foundation, in collaboration with the Rural Trust, produced "Dollars & Sense: The Cost-Effectiveness of Small Schools." To read this short, engaging book and its sequel, visit www.kwfdn.org.

Other notable articles on small schools and consolidation:

- "What Does a Small School Mean to a Community?" (Lyson, T.A.; *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 131-137)
- "How Smaller Schools Prevent School Violence" (Klonsky, M.; *Educational Leadership*, 59 [5], 65-69).
- "Closing Costs: School Consolidation in West Virginia" (Eyre, Eric, and Scott Finn; [Charleston] *Gazette* series, Aug.-Oct. 2002).
- "Don't Supersize Me: The Relationship of Planned Construction Costs to Planned School Enrollment in the U.S." (Howley, C.B.; paper presented at annual meeting of International Society for Education Planning, Bologna, Italy, October 2005).
- "School Size and the Influence of Socioeconomic Status on Student Achievement: Confronting the Threat of Size Bias in National Data Sets" (Howley, C.B & Howley, A; *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 12 [52]).

Keywords

ACCESS (*Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators and Students Statewide*) — state initiative launched in 2005 to make Advanced Placement (AP), elective and other courses available to Alabama high school students through distance learning.

achievement gap — the disparity on various measures between the academic performance of groups of students, such as those defined by race/ethnicity, socio-economic status or gender.

consolidation — the practice of closing small community schools and combining them into larger, centralized facilities for projected economic or educational benefits.

distance learning — delivery of education/training from one site to another by means of electronic media.

small school — generally, a school with two or fewer classrooms or homerooms per grade.

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