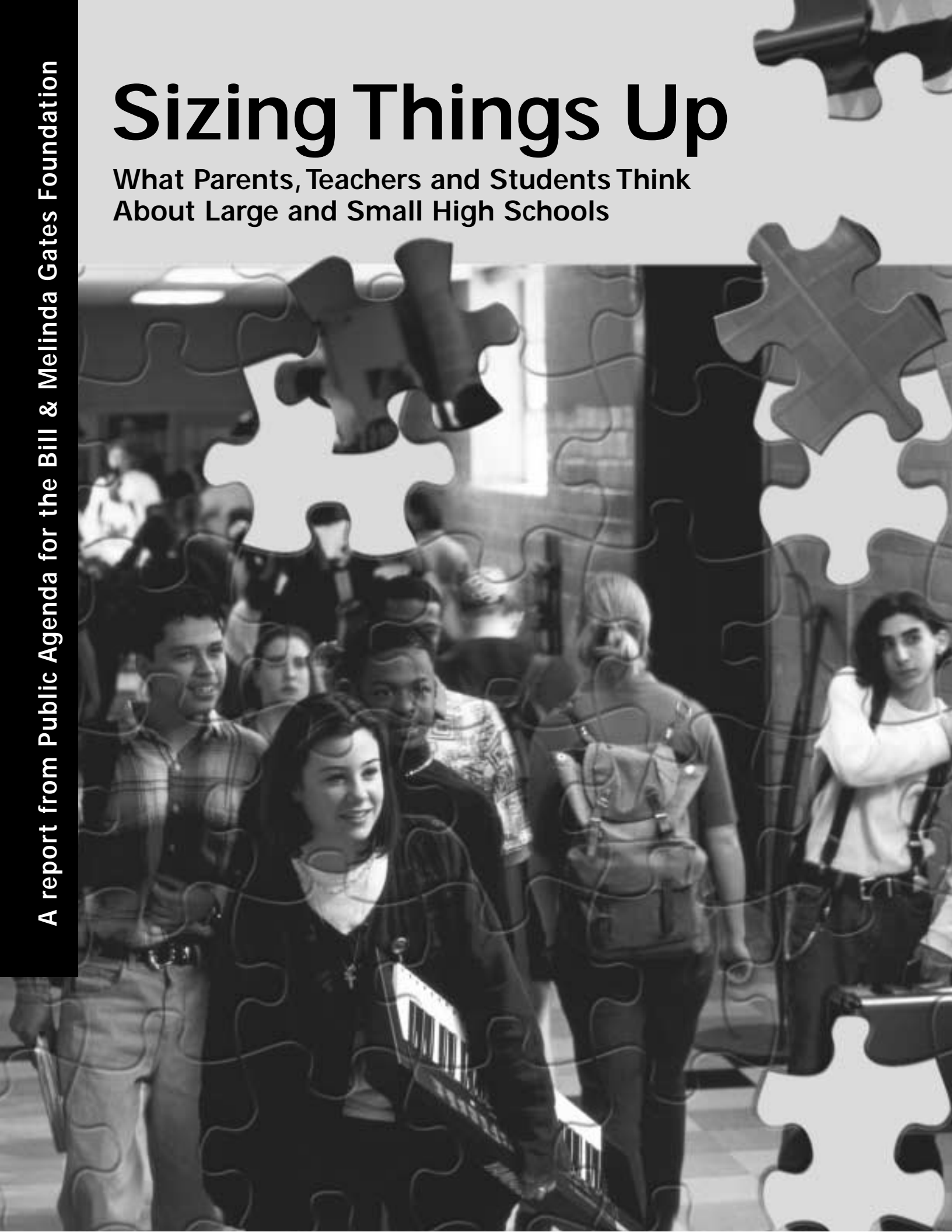


Sizing Things Up

What Parents, Teachers and Students Think
About Large and Small High Schools



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What Parents, Teachers and Students Think
About Large and Small High Schools

A report from Public Agenda

Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett,
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contributed to this report

ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Public Agenda's particular expertise lies in crafting research studies that explore different points of view with empathy and that probe beneath surface responses to capture the public's concerns and assumptions. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Our citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision-makers across the political spectrum. Our Web site, Public Agenda Online, provides comprehensive information on a wide range of public opinion and public policy issues.

ABOUT THE BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is committed to helping all students achieve. In pursuit of this goal, the foundation supports the development of new, small focused high schools and the transformation of large struggling schools into smaller, personalized learning communities. In addition, the foundation has created scholarship programs to reduce financial barriers to higher education for low-income students and invested in professional and leadership development initiatives for administrators and teachers. The foundation seeks to ensure that all students leave high school prepared for college, work and civic contribution. For further information, visit www.gatesfoundation.org.

Public Agenda, which takes no position on the issue of smaller high schools, was given complete discretion by the Gates Foundation in conducting and reporting the results of this study.

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INTRODUCTION

Hallways are so packed at California's Van Nuys High that school officials lengthened the breaks between classes to seven minutes so that the school's 3,600 students would be able to reach their next class on time. Next year, Van Nuys will operate on a year-round schedule in order to accommodate the 4,000-plus students expected to attend.¹ Headlines about overcrowded, jam-packed public high schools are hardly rare. Many communities face swelling enrollments, and building new schools is no easy task these days, financially or politically.

Jam-packed Schools vs. Smaller Is Better

There is a certain irony that very large, severely overcrowded public high schools have become such visible phenomena just at a time when some prominent education experts are calling for precisely the opposite.

Armed with an impressive sheaf of academic studies, a group of influential reformers has launched what can only be described as a "smaller is better" movement, many calling for high schools of around 500 pupils.²

These reformers say that teenagers thrive academically and socially in smaller, more personal settings and that teachers and parents benefit as well. A smaller school, they believe, offers an atmosphere that is more conducive to learning and one that cultivates cooperation among teachers and between teachers and families. The kind of comfortable, informal communication that takes place readily in a small institution is simply not feasible, these advocates say, in a larger, more anonymous, more harried one.

Promising "Early Returns"

The idea seems to make intuitive sense. Management experts in business and government have suggested that smaller organizations tend to have more focus, sustain better morale and show more ingenuity than larger ones. And in public education, the "early returns" seem very promising.

In New York City, for example, a recent comparison of more than 100 small-by-design public high schools to other high schools in the city shows higher graduation rates, higher college attendance rates and lower costs per graduate.³

No Headlong Rush to Small Schools

Yet despite these promising developments, there has not been a headlong rush to make high schools smaller. Most public high school students attend schools of 1,000 or more.⁴ Even if every school official in the country could be persuaded of the benefits of making schools smaller, recasting the existing educational landscape is a monumental job, one almost bound to spark controversy over who, when, where and how. As a recent headline in *Education Week* put it so pointedly, communities that contemplate dividing a large high school into smaller units often find very quickly that "breaking up is hard to do."⁵

Recasting the existing educational landscape is a monumental job, one almost bound to spark controversy over who, when, where and how.

In *Sizing Things Up: What Parents, Teachers and Students Think about Large and Small High Schools*, Public Agenda takes a look at the public opinion side of this issue. Other studies have compared the academic skills and educational prospects of students in large and small high schools, looking at a variety of indicators such as dropout and attendance rates and student achievement.⁶ In this report, Public Agenda focuses not on aggregate test scores or student outcomes, but on the perceptions, assumptions, concerns and aspirations of the three key groups involved—parents, teachers and students.

Small High Schools vs. Large Ones

To our knowledge, *Sizing Things Up* is the most detailed opinion study on this issue to date. It grew out of a multilayered research process that began with one-on-one interviews with experts, academics, researchers, administrators and practitioners with various perspectives on the issue. The study also included focus groups with high school teachers and students in large and small schools and with parents whose teens attend large and small schools.

The heart of the research consisted of three national surveys: one of 801 parents of children currently attending a public high school, a second of 920 public high school teachers and a third of 1,008 public high school students. For each group, the study compares the

views of those in small high schools (with 500 students or fewer) to those in much larger ones (schools with 1,500 students or more). The methodology section of this report includes detailed information about how the study was conducted.

All Manner of Small Schools

It is important to point out that *Sizing Things Up* is not a report on the experiences of parents, teachers and students in the model small high schools that have been developed in recent years as part of the specific reform movement. Instead, Public Agenda's study looks at the views of randomly selected respondents from small, medium and large high schools of all types in all parts of the country. In this study, most of the people in small high schools come from rural areas, and most in large high schools come from either cities or suburbs (see Methodology).

Public Agenda's research for *Sizing Things Up* was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which supports smaller high schools and has provided funding both to help school districts redesign large high schools and to help model small schools replicate themselves. Public Agenda takes no position on the issue of smaller high schools and was given a free hand by the Gates Foundation to conduct the research according to our discretion. Public Agenda takes full responsibility for the results of this study.

Rating the Schools They Know Best

The results from the focus groups and the three national surveys provide an enormously rich and intriguing set of data. In Findings One, Two and Three, *Sizing Things Up* reports in turn on what parents, teachers and students tell us about how their own schools work, looking carefully at differences that emerge between the experiences and viewpoints of the "large school" vs. "small school" groups. The results of the surveys spotlight some important differences—ones that advocates of smaller schools and defenders of larger ones will need to ponder carefully.

But data from these three large-scale Public Agenda surveys also suggest that some contemporary problems seem to shadow teens no matter what size school they attend, and some long-standing concerns plague high

school teachers regardless of how few students are in the schools. In Findings Four and Five, we take a detailed look at these overarching problems.

Reactions to a Movement

In the closing sections of *Sizing Things Up*, Public Agenda turns its attention to the political prospects for the "small schools" idea.

Finding Six spells out the assumptions parents, teachers and students typically make about the pros and cons of large and small schools. Finding Seven suggests how the idea of reducing school size may fare when communities nationwide begin to wrestle with what it would mean locally. Finding Eight looks at the particular

concerns teachers and parents have about class size, concerns that in many ways supersede and override their views on school size. Selected results from these last three findings were previously released in fall 2001.

Some contemporary problems seem to shadow teens no matter what size school they attend, and some long-standing concerns plague high school teachers regardless of how few students are in the schools.

No Mud-slinging Yet

Unlike many topics in education, such as bilingual education, vouchers or how to teach first graders to read, the debate surrounding high school size has not yet crystallized into mutually divisive, competing camps. Proponents of smaller schools believe they have an idea that can help kids learn. Those who question them generally focus not so much on the idea itself as on whether it is practical or the best use of limited money and time. At the district level, the arguments involve money, of course, but also the long-term habits and loyalties of those who are attached to particular schools as they currently exist.

Public Agenda's main purpose is to describe what parents, teachers and students understand about this issue and what they see in the large and small high schools they know best. Our hope is that the research we offer will promote a more inclusive and informative discussion of this idea, one that appeals not just to education experts and professionals, but to the broader community of all who care about our public schools.

FINDING ONE: PARENTS RATE THEIR OWN SCHOOLS

On all but a handful of measures, parents of students in small high schools give their schools better marks than parents of students in large high schools. Small school parents are considerably happier with their schools on social issues such as civility, student alienation and parent-teacher engagement. They also are more likely to speak positively of their schools when it comes to academic preparation and achievement.

Headlines about education reform always seem to promise either redemption or disaster—whether the issue is standards and testing, teacher accountability or vouchers and choice. Behind the headlines, however, the education research picture is often more nuanced and less clear-cut than one might assume. Given the many factors and influences that contribute to human learning—and the extraordinary difficulty of disentangling them for research purposes—proving that reform X results in outcome Y is not a simple matter. And even when research strongly suggests that certain reforms might be helpful, stimulating change in thousands of school districts nationwide is a massive undertaking.

One intuitively compelling reform notion is that, for myriad reasons, students are more likely to flourish in smaller schools and flounder in larger ones. Even as a growing body of research supports this idea, the nation’s schools have moved in the opposite direction—toward large, comprehensive high schools rather than smaller ones.⁷ But practical concerns and the sheer difficulty of instituting change limit communities’ abilities to put the research into practice. For any community, the stakes are high.

The Consumer View

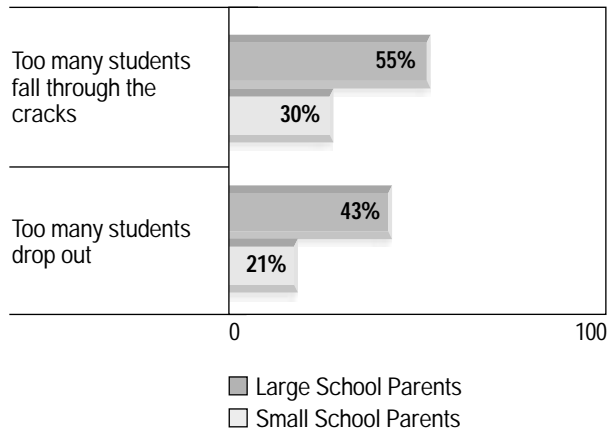
In reality, reforms succeed and fail not only on their inherent merit, but also on their receptivity. In the context of this issue (school size), it makes sense to hear from the consumers—the parents, teachers and students—who have to live, work and learn in these schools. What do their experiences tell us?

In this finding, we focus on the parents’ perspective. The analysis compares parents whose children attend large high schools (1,500 or more students) to parents

whose children attend small high schools—defined here as those that enroll 500 or fewer students.* Parents were asked to talk about their own child’s high school, in an effort to anchor their attitudes to their own experiences and observations rather than solicit their global read on the state of the nation’s high schools. Naturally, even these attitudes are based upon subjective judgment.

Kids More Likely to Fall Through the Cracks in Large High Schools

% of high school parents who say this is a “very” or “somewhat” serious problem in their child’s high school:



Note: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

*Rather than relying on parents’ estimates of school size, Public Agenda independently verified student enrollment of respondents’ schools. See Methodology on page 52 for full description of the verification process.

Few Go to Small Schools

One of the first findings to emerge from this random survey of 801 parents of high schoolers is that few households (14%) currently have children who are enrolled in small high schools, while more than a third (36%) have children enrolled in large ones. This is interesting only if school size actually matters. And it seems that it does, at least to parents: small high schools consistently garner better marks from parents whose children attend them, often exactly in the areas small school advocates would predict. Small school parents are more likely than large school parents to speak positively about their school's culture on such issues as civility, student alienation and parent and teacher engagement. They are also more likely to speak well of their school's academic achievement on such issues as dropout rates, language skills and test scores.

Just a Cozier Feeling?

The discussion about the benefits and drawbacks of small schools will not be settled definitively here. For

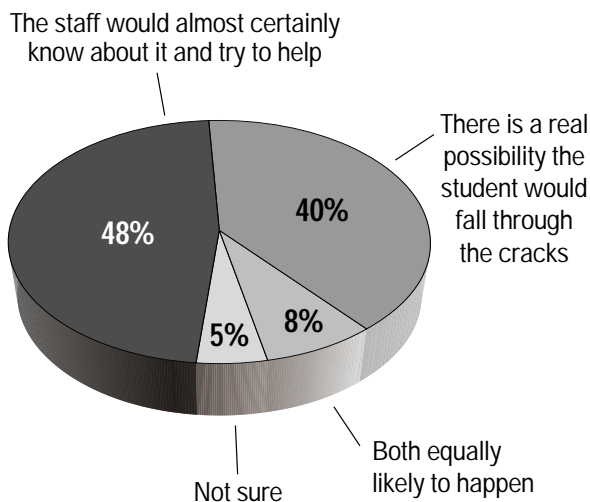
one thing, the magnitude of the differences is often modest. Also, it is possible that parents in small schools are more apt to assess them positively because they are somehow more sentimental about or feel closer to their own school. And, of course, variations in the demographic characteristics of small and large high schools—and their communities—could be driving the differences in perceptions.*

What's more, the three surveys underpinning this study—of parents, teachers and students—do not fully corroborate one another. While there are consistent differences between the two groups of parents, students in large and small high schools show very similar attitudes about their schools and report comparable levels of academic and social problems. Meanwhile, the differences between the large and small school teachers tend to be less dramatic than the parents' story.

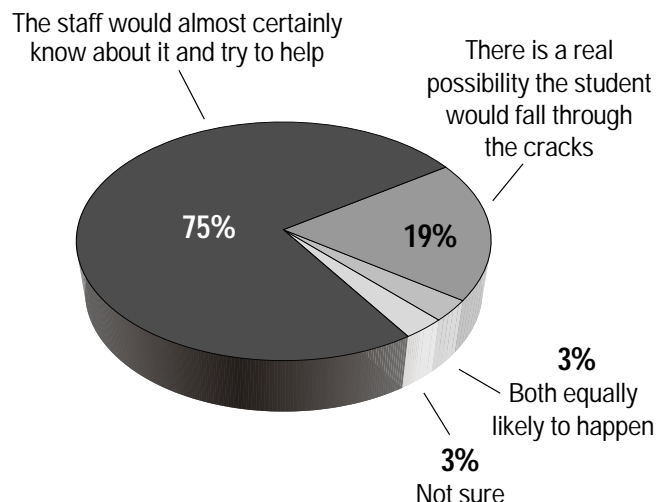
**See Methodology on page 52 for a demographic comparison of the samples of large vs. small high school parents, teachers and students.*

More Help Is Available in Small High Schools

If a student were struggling or going through a tough time at your child's high school, which would be more likely to happen?



LARGE SCHOOL PARENTS



SMALL SCHOOL PARENTS

More Likely to Catch Those Who Fall

Researchers and advocates explain that the virtue of having a small number of students in a high school lies in the creation of a close-knit community, where educators can pay better attention to the students and intervene when kids fall behind, and where communication between teachers and students and among students themselves is easier. One parent described her small high school like this: “In the school that my son goes to, I have a lot of communication with the teachers and the counselors. They don’t have behavior problems because [students] know that they’re in contact with you constantly.”

“They Know You; They Know the Kid”

Small high school parents are considerably more likely to expect that their child’s high school will detect—and respond—when students have problems. Seventy-five percent of small school parents say that if a student was struggling and going through a tough time in their school, the staff would almost certainly know about it and try to help, compared to a significantly smaller percentage of large school parents (48%). “If you talk to your teacher and you say your name, they say, ‘Oh yeah.’ They know you, they know the kid,” said a Westchester, New York mom whose son attends a small high school. Less than a third (30%) of small school parents say that “too many students fall through the cracks” in their child’s school, compared to more than half (55%) of large school parents.

What’s more, if kids fall behind, half (50%) of small school parents say “struggling students get effective help” in their school; among large high school parents, the number falls to 36%. A parent of a student attending a relatively large public high school in St. Louis said that some of her son’s teachers “...don’t seem like they are caring or concerned. They say, ‘Well, you figure it out. Read the book. You don’t understand it? Sorry.’” And while only 21% of small school parents say that “too many students drop out” in their child’s school, more than twice as many large school parents say this is true in their child’s school (43%).

Of Bullies and Outcasts

Various accounts have pinned the problem of school violence on the factory-like atmosphere of large schools, where students can get lost, stay anonymous and—in the worst cases—become embittered outcasts.

According to parents, larger high schools do appear to be more intimidating and less hospitable. Large school parents are more likely than small school parents to point to student alienation and isolation as a serious problem in their school (40% vs. 23%). While 41% of large school parents say “too many students bully and harass other students” in their school, only 27% of small school parents say this is true in their schools. And

Less than a third of small school parents say that “too many students fall through the cracks,” compared to more than half of large school parents.

whereas just over 1 in 3 large school parents (36%) think “students are civil and respectful toward each other” in their child’s school, nearly half (49%) of small school parents feel this way. A mother of a student in a large public high school in Boston described why she is trying to switch her daughter into a smaller school: “She just doesn’t want to go to school, because she’s afraid to go. She gets picked on. It’s all peer pressure and everything else. She just hates going to school.”

On a First-Name Basis

Several years ago, Public Agenda researchers visited a huge inner-city high school in the Midwest to try to understand why some students thrived and some failed in the face of adverse circumstances. With more than 4,000 students to supervise, the principal could not recall any student by name and even had trouble remembering the name of the instructor heading a special program for pregnant students. It may not be surprising, but it is notable: Only 23% of large school parents say that “the teachers and principals know almost all the students by name” in their child’s school, compared to almost three times as many small school parents (68%).

Small schools appear to get personal not only for students but for parents as well. The drop-off in parental involvement from elementary and middle schools to the high school level has been well documented. In this study, only 21% of large high school parents say that the statement “I’m a parent who is very active at my child’s school—I often volunteer for events and many people in the building know me” describes them very well. More than twice as many small school parents, however, describe themselves in such terms (44%).

Academic Results

The optimism of small school advocates encompasses improved academic achievement as well as improved communication and civility. And the parents’ survey results lend some support to this premise: those whose children attend small high schools are consistently more likely to be happy with the academic preparation and achievement in their schools.

For example, small school parents are more likely than large school parents to report that in their school “students learn to speak and write well, with proper

pronunciation and grammar”—a 64% to 47% margin. More than half of small school parents (56%) say students in their school get high scores on achievement tests, compared to 41% of large high school parents. And small high school parents also are more likely to say that their school has high academic expectations and pushes students to do their very best (68% to 53%).

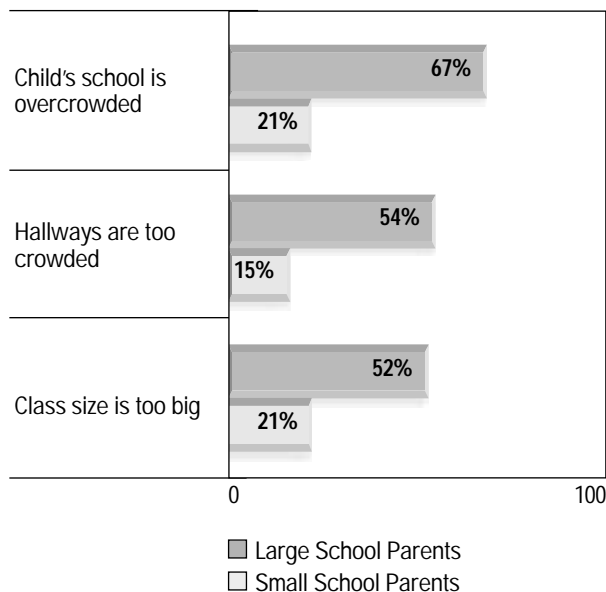
Small Schools = Small Classes?

In focus groups across the country, Public Agenda has repeatedly heard parents and teachers talk about how students benefit from—and thrive—in small classes. And, logically, schools could provide small classes whether the overall size of the school is large or small. Yet in the focus group discussions, parents assumed—often adamantly—that small school size necessarily meant small class size. After talking up the advantages of community in her child’s small high school, for example, one parent seamlessly began talking about the advantages of smaller classes: “If you have too many in a class, you’re not going to learn. If you have a problem or you want to talk to the teacher, you can’t get to them because there are so many kids.” The moderator pointed out that the discussion had moved from smaller school size to smaller class size—did the two necessarily go together? he asked. Another parent jumped in: “Sure they’ll have smaller class size.” “It works hand in hand,” chimed in another.

The survey data suggest that in the real world the two issues may indeed be linked, as parents presume. More than half of large school parents (52%) say “class size is too big” in their child’s school, compared to far fewer small school parents (21%)—a difference of 31 percentage points. Large school parents are more than three times likely to say their schools are overcrowded (67% vs. 21%). And large school parents are more likely to cite overcrowded hallways as a problem in their child’s school (54% vs. 15%)—a difference of 39 percentage points.

Large High Schools: Crowded Hallways, Crowded Classes

% of high school parents who say:



Small Schools, Less Diversity

On virtually all the measures covered in this survey of parents, small high schools are seen to have a considerable edge. But there is one area where parents report

small high schools are sorely lacking: providing a diverse student body.

Americans will tell you with a certain degree of pride that theirs is a diverse nation, and parents in focus groups typically say they want their children to experience some of that diversity in school. On this measure small high schools seem noticeably lacking, perhaps because of their geographical location (see Methodology). While almost 7 in 10 parents (68%) whose children attend small high schools say there are only a few or no Hispanic or African American students in the building, the number drops to 33% among large high school parents. This was the major complaint of one Westchester dad: “My children are going to a high school that has 400 students in it. And I mean, there’s no cultural diversity. Half of my adult life is being able to get along in business and to communicate with Asian people, African American people...the cultures you are exposed to....There’s not enough diversity [at the school], there really isn’t.”

All in all, parents with children in small high schools offer a great deal of supporting testimony for advocates of smaller high schools. But as we will see in the following findings, the judgments of parents, teachers and students do not necessarily confirm each another. Yet each perspective needs to be absorbed and judged equally valid. Advocates for smaller schools—and for other reforms as well—would be well served to listen to each carefully for what it illuminates.

Americans will tell you with pride that theirs is a diverse nation, and parents want their children to experience some of that in school. On this measure small high schools seem noticeably lacking.

FINDING TWO: TEACHERS RATE THEIR OWN SCHOOLS

Teachers in large high schools tend to give their schools lower ratings in key areas, including maintaining high academic standards, providing help for struggling students, and letting too many fall through the cracks. As with parents, the most dramatic differences revolve around overcrowding—in classes, in the hallways and in the school building. Still, on many issues there appear to be few or no differences between the experiences of large and small high school teachers.

Slipping through the Cracks

Advocates say that in smaller schools educators are more likely to spot, care and intervene when students struggle, while in large high schools it's easier for a student to veer off course without anyone noticing. A comparison of what teachers in large and small high schools say about this issue lends some modest support to this expectation. One high school teacher who participated in the survey said it best: "There are disadvantages to attending a small school, but I think the advantages greatly overshadow them."

The chances that a school has "too many teachers just going through the motions" seem higher in large high schools—35% of large school teachers say this of their school, compared with 20% of small school teachers. While half (50%) of teachers working in large high schools say that "too many students fall through the cracks" at their school, the number drops to 31% among teachers working in small high schools. High school teachers in large schools are less confident that their school's staff would spot and try to help a student who was going through a tough time (50% vs. 70% for small high school teachers). A teacher working in a small high school said, "Although our students are often not academically gifted, we know almost all of them by name—we take care of problems quickly." Finally, large school teachers are more likely to report a dropout problem—by a 47% to 32% margin.

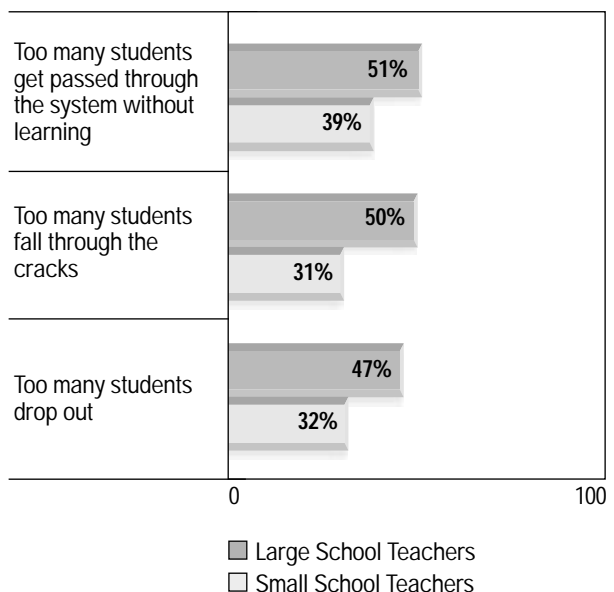
"It's Just Absolutely Insane"

But it is issues involving overcrowding that show differences of the greatest magnitude, and it is large high schools that appear to fare poorly. In this, teachers echo and support the experience of parents as reported in Finding One.

While 65% of large school teachers report that "class size is too big" in their school, only 21% of small school teachers do so. More than half (55%) of large school teachers point to hallways that are too crowded, but only 14% of small school teachers do so. "The school is supposed to hold somewhere around 1,400 or 1,500 students," complained one large high school teacher, "and you cannot walk through the halls in between the bells. As a matter of fact, they extended the passing period from five minutes to ten minutes just so kids could get to class on time. I mean it's just absolutely insane."

Teachers Report More Failures in Large Schools

% of high school teachers who say this is a "very" or "somewhat" serious problem in their school:



Finally, more than 3 in 4 large school teachers (77%) believe their school is overcrowded in general, while only 22% of small school teachers feel that way. One teacher working in a large high school speculated about the effect this has on the students: “Sometimes I’m standing in the hallway and these kids are just kind of going by and I think, Do they really feel like they’re a part of the school?”

To Know You Is To...

Perhaps by definition, it is far easier for students to know and be known by name in smaller schools. In fact, 82% of small school teachers say that at their school the teachers and principal know almost all the students by name; among large school teachers, this figure plummets to 13%.

“I teach in one of the largest schools in the country,” one teacher said. “I don’t even know the names of some of the other teachers in the building.” Overcrowding and knowing kids’ names also seems to affect the ability of staff to restore order during moments of confrontation, according to this teacher: “Discipline in the hall. Oh, absolutely. You see something start to happen and you know the kid, you can

say, ‘So-and-so, hey, cool it.’ If you don’t know the kid, you have no authority that way.”

Disruptive, obnoxious behavior is one problem, the threat of violence quite another. About one-third of small school teachers (32%) think a serious violent incident is very or somewhat likely to happen in the next two years at their school. But among large high school teachers, the percentage is even higher (46%).

Smaller Differences

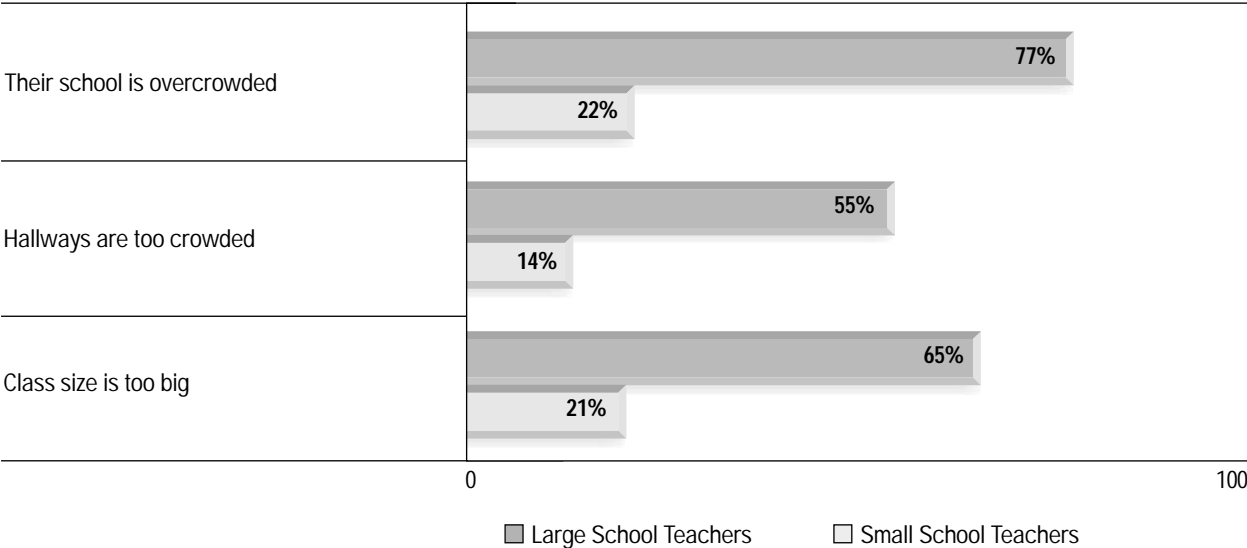
In other areas, differences in the perceptions of large and small school teachers are less dramatic. By a 51% to 39% margin, teachers in large high schools are more likely to report that “too many students get passed through the system without learning.” They are also more likely than small school teachers to say that “academic achievement is too low” in their school (52% to 42%).

“You Might as Well Forget about Electives”

Despite the advantages small schools appear to have in many areas, there are some where large high schools seem to have an edge. According to teachers, large high

Teachers Say Large High Schools Plagued by Overcrowding

% of high school teachers who say:



schools appear to be better able than small ones to offer “a wide variety of courses”—59% of teachers in large high schools say this describes their school, compared to 35% of small school teachers. “I struggle with that,” said one teacher working in a relatively small high

“I teach in one of the largest schools in the country,” one teacher said. “I don’t even know the names of some of the other teachers in the building.”

school. “You get below 1,000, you might as well forget about electives. And I think electives are extremely important for two reasons. Number one, that’s true personalization for the kid, because the kid is now having some

choice in his own education. Secondly, I think the teacher teaches better when teaching an elective course of their choice. I think you’re more enthusiastic. The kids can sense that you are.”

More Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Large High Schools

Small high schools also appear more likely to be racially and ethnically homogeneous—which is consistently perceived as a negative by teachers, parents and students alike. Fully 71% of small high school teachers say few or none of the students in their building are African American or Hispanic; only 24% of large school teachers say the same. “Children who attend larger schools are able to take a larger variety of courses—and meet a variety of different people,” wrote one teacher, who is also a parent. “My own children graduated from a high school of less than 400, and I believe they would have benefited more from a school of 1,000—or far more.”

This lack of ethnic and racial diversity may be driven by the fact that smaller high schools are far more likely to be located in small towns and rural areas—which in turn may be less likely to have significant minority populations. In this survey, 39% of small-town and rural teachers work in high schools that have 500 or fewer students, compared to only 9% of urban and 8% of suburban teachers. As one teacher from a rural area wrote, “I truly believe that rural students miss out on a lot of opportunities because of the lack of culture. I believe that students should experience many different cultures because that’s how the world really is.”

Areas of No Difference

As we will discuss in Findings Four and Five, there are a number of important areas where small and large school teachers report similar experiences—even though advocates would have predicted that small schools would stand out. Some of these “non-differences” regard measures of school spirit, parental involvement, teacher morale and trust and cooperation between principal and teachers.

In the End

Taken together, what teachers say about the state of their schools is instructive. Some of the differences over academic achievement are consistent but modest. Some of the differences that emerge—especially those on overcrowding—are provocative not only because they clearly confirm what parents say, but because they are so large.

FINDING THREE: STUDENTS RATE THEIR OWN SCHOOLS

Unlike parents and teachers, students in large and small high schools report very similar situations in their schools. On the whole, their perspective is upbeat, but teens in both types of schools also report fairly lackluster academic progress. Teens in large high schools, not surprisingly, have more complaints about overcrowding in hallways and classrooms.

In any debate on school size, the views of adults are bound to carry more weight. Parents, teachers and other adults often bring a knowledge and perspective to educational issues that few teenagers have. When it comes to reducing school size in most communities, adult views will no doubt be pivotal. Yet getting firsthand reports of students on what they see and experience daily in schools can be revealing. In this case, the teens' observations are at times reassuring, but they are often jarring as well.

First the Good News

This survey of teens contains one piece of good news that seems to apply to teens across the board, regardless of whether their own school is large or small. Most American high school students appear to be upbeat about their education, and strong majorities say they can count on friends, family, teachers and other adults in school to help them when they need it. Whatever challenges they face and whatever problems they report in their schools, their optimism and confidence are high.

Regardless of their school's size, a healthy two-thirds of American teens say they are happy with their school overall (66% of those in large high schools and 67% of those in small). At least 7 in 10 students say school spirit at their school is strong (70% and 75%, respectively). The vast majority—almost 8 in 10—say that doing well in school makes them feel good about themselves (78% and 76%, respectively). About half say they play on a sports team (46% and 53%, respectively), and about 6 in 10 say they participate in a school activity other than sports (60% and 63%, respectively).

Getting By with a Little Help from My Friends

In a refreshing vote of confidence in the adults around them, large majorities of teens say they have an adult at

school they really trust to give them help or advice—71% for students in large high schools and 79% for students in small ones. “You could go to any one of them. If you had a problem with a class, if you said I need a little extra help on this... You could go to them for help about pretty much anything,” one sophomore said about the teachers in his school of 1,600. And, not surprisingly, a large majority of high schoolers (79% and 82%, respectively) say they also have very close friends at school they can “really count on.”

Most teens also give their own parents reasonably good marks on at least the basic elements of involvement. It wasn't uncommon to hear comments like this one from a student in suburban Dallas, “They are involved with my life—a little bit too much.

I am happy for that, I guess.” Most report that their parents usually attend parent-teacher meetings—69% for teens in large high schools and an impressive 81% for those attending small ones. As just one modest measure of how

much the students actually talk with their parents about what happens at school, about 7 in 10 teens say their parents know their favorite teacher's name (66% in large high schools and 74% in small).

“You could slack off at our school, but since it is pretty small they would catch it. They expect you to do well because the help is there for you.”

—California student

Still Waiting for the Closing Bell

If the good news from students seems too good to be true, the survey also offers a reassuring touch of reality. Regardless of their school's size, about 4 in 10 teens admit that they “usually can't wait for the school day to end” (42% of large and 40% of small high school students). In the same vein, only about half of the students say they are trying their best in school; 51%

of large school teens and 47% of small admit that they could be working harder.

The students' positive views about their schools carry over to their teachers as well, and again this applies for students attending both large and small high schools. A student from one of the larger high schools in our focus groups told us, "I don't even have to come [sic] to them. My grade was slipping...and my Spanish teacher said 'you know I have tutoring in the morning, just come in.'" And a student from a small high school in suburban Cleveland said the teachers in her school "know you by name. You could just ask them any time to help you...and they're always willing." Majorities give their teachers high marks for knowing their subject matter (79% of large, 82% of small), treating students

with respect (75% of large, 81% of small), providing extra help to students (64% of large, 61% of small) and challenging them to do their best (64% of large, 67% of small).

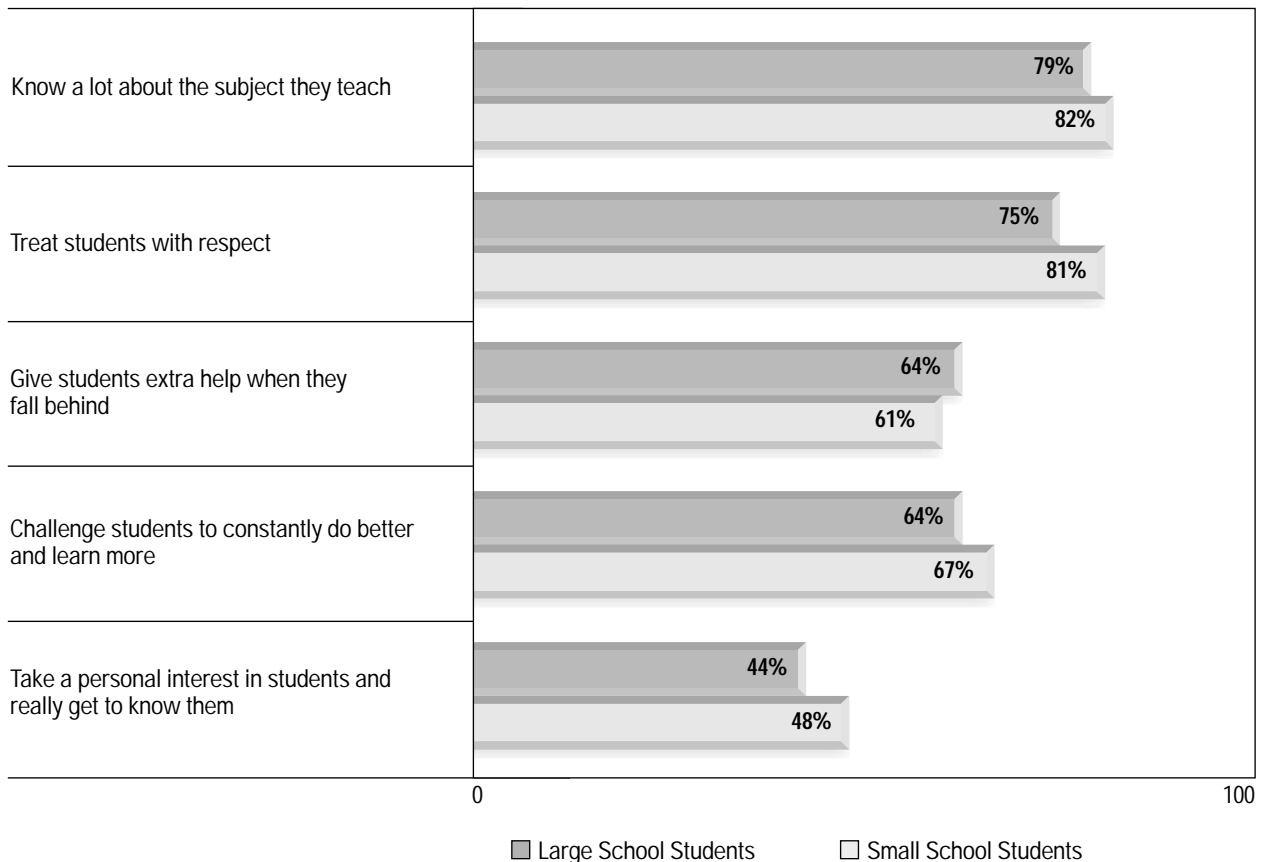
Students are somewhat less likely to give teachers good ratings for taking a personal interest in them, but there's no substantial difference between the views of students in large schools and those of students in small ones: 44% of large school students say all or almost all of their teachers take a personal interest in the students, compared to 48% of students in small schools.

Corroborating the reports from parents and teachers, there is some evidence from the teens that teachers are more likely to reach out to struggling students in smaller schools. Most of the small school students (60%) say

Students: A Teacher Is a Teacher

How many of your teachers do the following — almost all of your teachers, only some, or very few?

% of high school students who say "all" or "almost all" of their teachers do the following:



all or almost all of their teachers contact parents quickly if a student is falling behind. “You sneeze and your mom knows about it,” said one small high school student in a focus group. Among students in large high schools, that number drops to 45%. Similarly, almost two-thirds of students attending small schools (65%) say help is available for students who are struggling, compared to half of teens (52%) in the bigger schools. Said another small high school student, from California, “You could slack off at our school, but since it is pretty small they would catch it. They expect you to do well because the help is there for you.”

“It Doesn’t Matter If You Don’t Learn Anything”

Despite their upbeat assessment about their schools, teachers and personal relationships, the teens’ report on academic matters is less reassuring—particularly for those concerned about insuring basic skills for all. True, more than 6 out of 10 students from both large and small schools believe that their own school has high academic expectations and “really pushes them to do their best” (67% of large, 61% of small). Yet relatively small numbers (56% and 58%, respectively) say that students in their school “learn to speak and write well,

with proper pronunciation and grammar.” And about 4 in 10 report that “too many students get away with not doing their homework” (43% of large, 37% of small), and a similar number say that “too many students get passed through the system without learning” (41% of large, 36% of small). A college-bound senior from a high school of roughly 2,000 described it this way: “We live in an upper middle class, fairly rich area, and most people are not prepared for outside of high school at all. They really don’t have standards, they just care about the grade. It doesn’t matter if you don’t learn anything.”

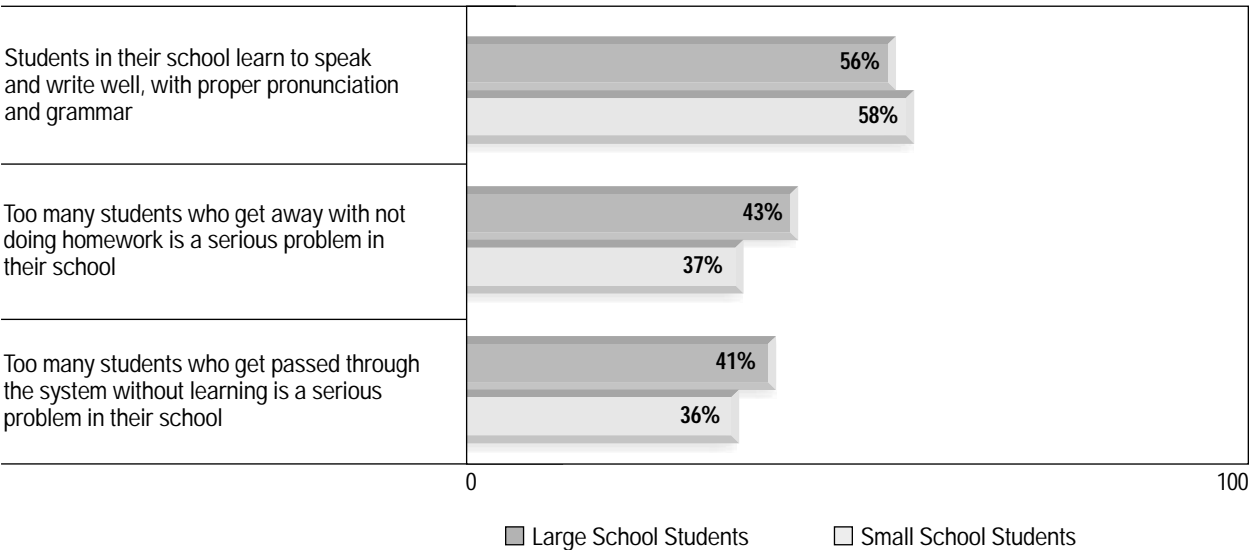
Small high schools, however, seem to be noticeably better at making sure that students come to school and attend class. Half as many students in small high schools report that “too many students get away with cutting class” (17% of small vs. 38% of large). In a perhaps not unconnected finding, three-quarters of students in small schools (75%) say that the school principal knows them by name, compared to just 28% of teens in large schools.

A Crush of Overcrowding

The most obvious and expected difference between the two groups of students is the explicit sense of crowding

Lackluster Academics in Both Large and Small High Schools

% of high school students who say:



reported by students in the large schools. Almost three-quarters of the teens in large schools (74%) say their school is overcrowded, compared to just 33% of teens in small schools. Nearly as many (71%) say the “hallways are too crowded,” compared to 42% of teens in small schools. And teens in large schools are more than twice as likely—by a 48% to 20% margin—to say that their classes are too big. Still, whatever size their school may be, most of the teens are happy with what they have. Majorities in both large schools (59%) and small (68%) say they want their school to have the same number of students it has now.

Plenty of Clubs in Small Schools

For their part, students in small schools do not seem much bothered by some of the widely feared drawbacks to small high schools. Like their counterparts in large schools, very few complain about serious problems with lack of after-school activities and clubs (15% of small school students and 9% of large). And, like their counterparts in large schools, more than half say there’s a strong emphasis on computers and technology (54% and 60%, respectively). Also, more than half of small school students (53%) say that “there are a lot of courses to choose from,” although this number is, as expected, much lower than the 76% of large school students who say this.

A chief difference—again not unexpected, but still notable—is that just 39% of small school students say that a lot of their classmates come from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, compared to 73% of large school students. “I like to call it the bubble,” said a student from a small high school in suburban Cleveland. “Like, you don’t see anything. It’s not diverse at all here.”

A Shared Milieu

Given the accumulating academic research suggesting that students benefit from attending small high schools, some readers may be surprised—and some small school advocates disappointed—that the views of the two groups of students are not particularly different overall. To be sure, there are some intriguing contrasts in some very important areas—the propensity of faculty to reach out to students who are failing, for one. But on the whole, students’ reports about their school experiences are fairly similar regardless of what size school they are in.

It is worth pointing out, however, that American teens in schools large and small inhabit a shared social milieu. Parental expectations, teacher expectations and societal standards for what they should learn and how hard they should work seem certain to affect teenagers regardless of high school size. And as we will see in the next finding, drugs, cheating, cursing and a general lack of respect and courtesy are not uncommon.

Parental expectations, teacher expectations and societal standards for what they should learn and how hard they should work seem certain to affect teenagers regardless of high school size.

These are the ingredients of a surly, rough-edged teen world that may well transcend the academic and organizational benefits offered in smaller schools.

FINDING FOUR: PERVASIVE DISRESPECT IN SCHOOLS LARGE AND SMALL

According to parents, teachers and students, American high schools continue to be plagued by some unsettling social and discipline problems, regardless of their size. Teachers and students especially report problems with violence, drugs and alcohol, cheating, bullying and a general lack of respectfulness among the student body.

One of the main objectives of the research in *Sizing Things Up* was to explore the different experiences of parents, teachers and students in both large and small high schools. But some serious social problems seem to be broadly present in the nation’s high schools, regardless of their size. Not only are these problems troubling across the board, they are not new. They are problems that earlier research by Public Agenda and other opinion researchers have documented for over a decade.⁸

Violence in School

Media coverage of a string of student killings in American high schools—most visibly the Columbine tragedy in 1999—has undoubtedly raised concerns about violence in America’s schools. And in focus groups for this study, some parents described troubling

incidents that their own children have experienced: a daughter “jumped” by girls in school, a son “mugged” by fellow classmates on his way home from school. Not surprisingly, notably high numbers of parents (45% in large schools and 35% in small schools) and teachers (46% and 32%, respectively) think it’s at least somewhat likely that “a serious violent incident—an act that causes severe physical harm” will occur at their school in the next two years, and about 1 in 4 students concurs (27% and 20%, respectively). For substantial minorities of high school students, violence in schools is a fact of life: 46% of students in large high schools and 34% in small say they have seen “serious fights” at their high school at least monthly since they’ve been there—and this is as true for freshmen (36%) as it is for seniors (36%).

The Big Fears: Violence, Drugs and Alcohol

% of respondents who say:	PARENTS		TEACHERS		STUDENTS	
	Large Schools	Small Schools	Large Schools	Small Schools	Large Schools	Small Schools
Drugs and alcohol are a serious problem in their school	60	52	53	58	64	55
It is likely that a violent incident causing severe bodily harm will occur at their school in the next two years	45	35	46	32	27	20
At least once a month there’s a serious fight in school	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	46	34

Drugs and Alcohol

A recent poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates found that 66% of parents of teenagers worry a lot about their youngsters getting into trouble with drugs.⁹ And, in fact, a majority of high school seniors have tried some sort of illicit drug at least once in their lives.¹⁰ In this study, majorities of teens say their high school has a serious problem with too many students abusing alcohol or drugs (64% of teens in large schools and 55% of teens in small). According to a student in a small high school in suburban Cleveland: “Part of the problem is that they don’t enforce anything. Drinking and stuff is such a big problem here and they’re not really doing enough to stop it.” More than half of the parents and teachers, regardless of school size, also say drug and alcohol abuse is a serious problem in their school.

Peer Pressure, Widespread Cursing

While drugs and violence may attract the most attention, the more prosaic aspects of teen culture also emerge as serious concerns. Out of a list of 11 possible problems, peer pressure tops the list for students: majorities of high school students say that “too many

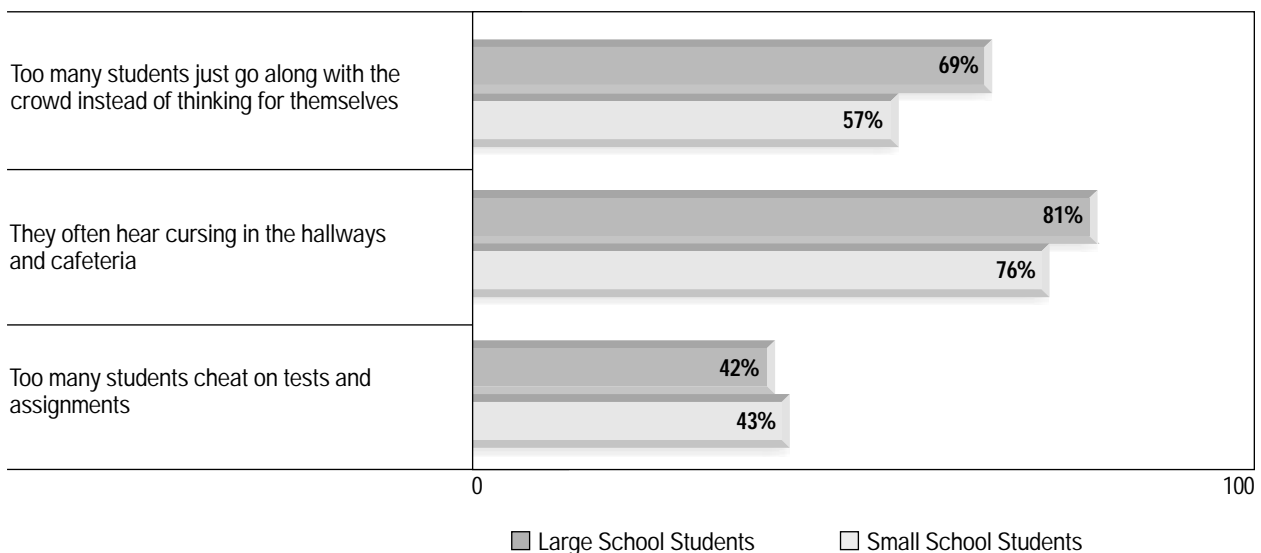
students just go along with the crowd instead of thinking for themselves” (69% of large school students and 57% of small). And substantial numbers of high school students surveyed say things should be better when it comes to how easy it is for new kids to make friends at their school (45% and 40%, respectively). A senior from the San Francisco Bay Area said that in his school (of 1,200 students) “all the kids know each other from middle school, so it’s hard for those new freshmen... The cliques are pretty well defined—they are already set by freshman year.”

Cursing in the hallways and cafeteria is common at both large and small high schools; very large majorities of students say they hear cursing often (81% of students in large high schools and 76% in small). Only about a third say students treat one another with respect (31% and 35%, respectively), and only about 1 in 5 say most students treat teachers with respect (16% and 22%, respectively). A teacher working in a large high school commented: “Kids don’t have respect for staff members walking down the hall. I mean, they bump into you and it’s like, ‘Hey, no big deal.’ They just keep walking, no ‘excuse me’ or ‘I’m sorry,’ or anything like that.”

Forty-two percent of large and 43% of small school students say that their school has a serious problem

A Coarse Environment for the Nation’s Teens

% of high school students who say:



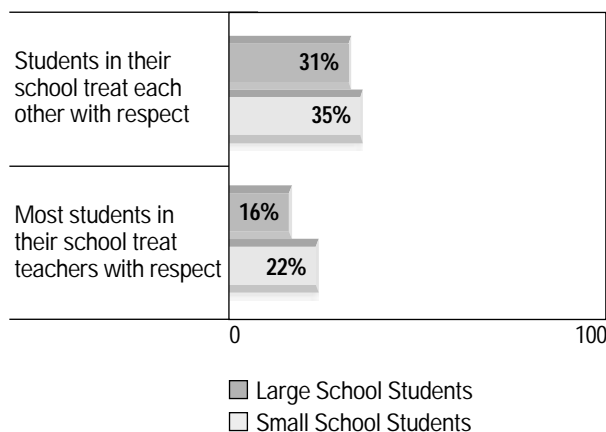
with “too many students cheating on tests and assignments.” In California, one young man told us, “I know so many people who cheat on tests. I know 100 ways to cheat on a test. A lot of people at our school do it.” A student from a small high school in Texas commented, “Everyone [sic] of us cannot say that we haven’t cheated on something before.”

Bullying and Alienation

Tragedies like Columbine have raised serious questions about bullying and the prevalence of alienated, deeply troubled students in contemporary public high schools. Survey research suggests that these problems, while not typical, are hardly out of the ordinary. In a recent survey of public school students in eighth through eleventh grades, almost 1 out of every 5 say he or she has fears of being hurt or harassed at school.¹¹ In *Sizing Things Up*, approximately 1 in 3 high school students say that their school has a serious problem with school bullies (34% of students in large schools and 32% in small). And about 1 in 4 high school teachers also say it’s a serious problem (28% and 26%, respectively). For their part, parents in large schools are considerably more likely than their small school counterparts to think bullying is a serious problem (41% vs. 27%).

Teens: Respect in Short Supply

% of high school students who say:



In addition, substantial numbers of teachers and parents say that their school faces a serious problem with too many students who “are alienated or socially isolated.” One in 3 large school teachers (34%) and 1 in 4 small school teachers (25%) feel this way, as do 40% of parents with children in large schools and 23% of those with children in small schools. And almost 1 in 4 students from large high schools (24%) say their school has a serious problem with too many students who “are loners and don’t have friends.” However, the number of students from small high schools who feel this way is considerably lower (14%).

Why Aren’t There Bigger Differences?

Many of those who strongly advocate reducing high school size may be surprised and somewhat disappointed that the views of those in larger high schools vs. those in smaller high schools are not strikingly different in these key areas. Many are convinced that the more personal, less anonymous milieu of smaller high schools can ease some of the social ills that seem to be part and parcel of today’s teenage experience. This is especially true, they contend, if these schools take advantage of their small size to establish closer bonds between students and adults and to reach out to students in danger of veering off track. But the results of the Public Agenda surveys suggest that many students in small high schools nationwide still inhabit a rough-edged world, replete with the usual panoply of adolescent risks.

It may be that many of the nation’s small high schools have not yet made use of their small size to develop closer bonds with their students. It may be that these social ills overpower the ability of even above average schools to address them. It may be that subsequent research will show that the perceptions reported here do not tell the whole story. Whatever the reason, these findings do seem to call for serious and open-minded consideration by those advocating smaller high schools. And for some, perhaps, the findings may also call for a franker acknowledgment that small schools, whatever their strengths and assets, still have many challenges to face.

FINDING FIVE: A DISPIRITED TEACHING CORPS IN SCHOOLS

LARGE AND SMALL

High school teachers, regardless of the size of their school, see significant need for improvement in a number of academic areas, and they are far more critical than parents or students. Relatively few claim that student learning is where it should be or that struggling students get the help they need. Equally troubling, morale is low among high school teachers across the board.

Inclination to Be Protective

Teachers in focus groups are often reluctant to speak in negative terms about their schools. Perhaps because they have been the victims of unfair criticism in the past, or because they fear being taken out of context, teachers take great pains to be fair and to explain their answers carefully. Teachers' inclination is to be protective toward their schools and students and to characterize them in the best possible light while still getting their point across.

Mixed Grades on Academics

Given this predilection, the number of high school teachers who acknowledge problems with student achievement is strikingly high, regardless of the size of their school. Many high school teachers grant that their schools have serious problems with overall low academic achievement (52% of large school teachers and 42% of small school teachers) and too many students getting passed through the system without learning (51% and 39%, respectively). A high school teacher in Seattle described his experience at a recent graduation ceremony: "There were people sitting in the faculty section looking at each other going 'How did that kid walk across the stage?' ... You look at some of these kids and say, I've had that kid in my class. He's not a bad kid, he didn't pass my class, he didn't pass five other classes, how is he walking across the stage?"

Nearly 3 out of 4 teachers (73% and 72%, respectively) say things should be better when it comes to students getting high scores on achievement tests. Even seemingly basic skills are lacking, such as learning "to speak and write well, with proper pronunciation and grammar"—only 21% of teachers in large high schools and 19% of those in small say this is an accurate description of

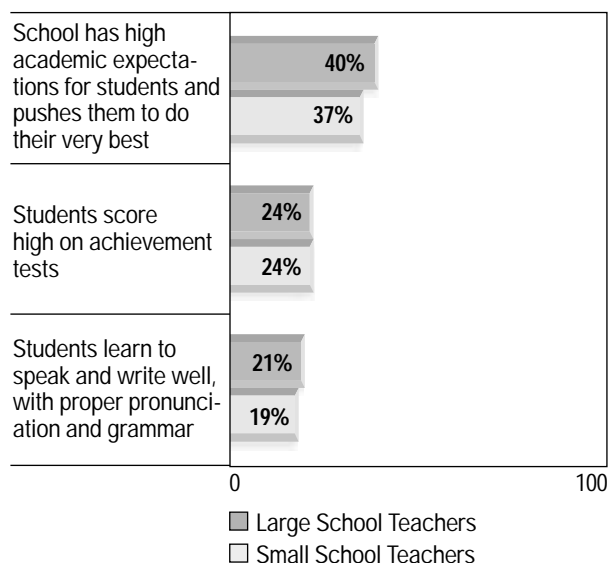
what happens in their school. In contrast, parents and students are much more likely to say students in their schools learn to speak and write properly.

Middling Expectations

Undoubtedly, the movement toward higher academic standards has raised the bar for the nation's students. A growing number of states now expect high academic standards to be reached by all students—those who excel as well as those who struggle. But, as is often the case, actual practices within the schools may not keep pace with mandates from the state. Only about 2 in 5 high school teachers (40% of large school teachers and 37% of small school teachers), for example, say their

Few Schools, Large or Small, Get High Marks for Academics

% of high school teachers who say:



school “has high academic expectations for students and pushes them to do their very best.” Most say things should be better in this regard. According to a high school teacher in Seattle, “We don’t hold kids back. We don’t hold them accountable. And we don’t flunk them because it’s easier to say let’s just get rid of them and they’re out of my face.” Interestingly, parents and students are considerably more likely to say that their school expects—and pushes—students to do well.

Parental Involvement Lacking

In *Playing Their Parts*, Public Agenda’s 1999 study about parental involvement in the public schools, 2 out of 3 K–12 teachers rated parents as only fair or poor in terms of involvement with their children’s education.¹² On this matter, it seems little has changed. Relatively few high school teachers give parents good marks—18% of those in large schools and 21% of those in small. And majorities of teachers say insufficient parental involvement is a serious problem in their school (63% of large and 53% of small). “I have taught at five different schools in as many years,” wrote one teacher. “The better schools are not limited to size or population, but by parent involvement.” Another wrote, “Your survey is focused on smaller schools—this is not the problem. Parental lack of concern...and bad parenting have made teaching difficult. Until the students change you can change schools all you want with no improvement.”

Little Collaboration

High school teachers in focus groups are always ready to point out how difficult their job is, given what they see as insufficient parental support and often tepid student motivation. They typically see upward of 150 students in the course of a school day, teachers say, and paperwork and other classroom management challenges are never-ending. Yet only about 1 in 5 high school teachers (22% in both large and small schools) say that teachers in their school “regularly meet to share ideas about lesson plans and methods of instruction.” One

teacher, who was otherwise happy with her school, wrote, “I see one major fault in our school—that is the lack of communication between departments.”

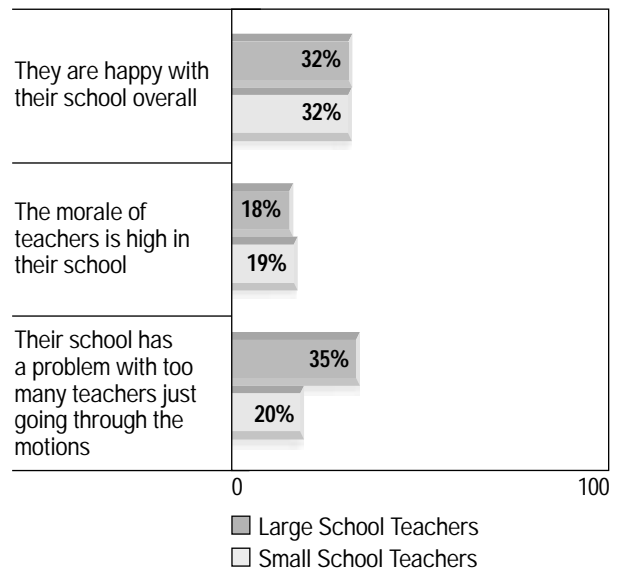
Low Morale

Scant parental involvement, low student achievement and few opportunities to collaborate are for many teachers just the beginning. Few teachers in large or small high schools voice genuine satisfaction with their work environment. Only about 1 in 3 teachers (32% of large and small) profess to be happy with their school overall; most say things should be better. Fewer than 1 in 5 say that the morale of the teachers at their school is high (18% and 19%, respectively). More than 1 in 3 teachers in large high schools (35%)—and 1 in 5 in small schools (20%)—say that their school has a serious problem with too many teachers who “are just going through the motions.”

Despite these complaints, working relationships between teachers and principals seem to be good. Majorities of high school teachers describe the trust and cooperation between the principal and teachers in their school as excellent or good (59% in large schools and 63% in small).

Low Teacher Morale in High Schools Large and Small

% of high school teachers who say:



FINDING SIX: RESPONDING TO A MOVEMENT

Regardless of whether they are in large or small high schools, parents, teachers and students believe that small schools have numerous advantages over large—from school atmosphere, to individualized attention and help for students, to small class size. While respondents believe that large high schools have many drawbacks, they also expect that larger schools are better when it comes to course offerings and diversity in the student body.

In previous sections, parents, teachers and students described their judgments of and experiences in their own high schools. In this section, we look at the assumptions they make about the comparative advantages and disadvantages of large and small high schools—regardless of the size of their own school. Even without personal experience, respondents have definite opinions about small high schools. These assumptions and opinions will almost certainly influence how receptive they are to the idea of small high schools.

Perceived Benefits of Small Schools

All groups surveyed—parents, teachers and students—believe small high schools will do better than large schools when it comes to teacher-student relations. Nearly 9 in 10 students (88%) say they believe smaller high schools are where “students would get more individual attention from teachers.”

Strong majorities of parents and teachers also think that teachers in small high schools are more likely to tailor instruction to fit individual student needs (parents 76%, teachers 65%). And more than half of teachers (56%) and 70% of both parents and students think smaller high schools are more apt to have teachers who take a personal interest in their students and really get to know them. A St. Louis mom said, “If I had a choice I’d prefer a smaller school because I feel like the child can be more known to everybody and kind of be in more of a personal relationship...maybe they would do better because they feel like they have to be more accountable for their actions. They couldn’t just slide by.” Finally, when teachers do a very poor job, almost 7 in 10 parents and teachers (69% for both) think it’s easier to spot them in smaller schools.

Up Close and Personal

The sense is that a smaller school makes it easier to notice—and reach out to—struggling students. Large majorities of parents (80%) and teachers (85%) think it will be easier to spot students in trouble if they are in a smaller school—“It’s just the one-on-one contact you can have with the teacher. You get more personal, I would think,” commented a Boston dad.

Large majorities of parents and teachers speculate that smaller high schools are also better suited for helping students in large urban districts.

At least half of parents (50%) and teachers (58%) also assume that struggling students are more likely to get effective help in small schools. “If they have a problem,” one mother from St. Louis said, “right away the teacher can pinpoint it and get on the phone and call Mom and Dad.” All of these perceived benefits add up: most parents (55%) and teachers (65%) believe that small high schools are more likely to have a low dropout rate.

Perhaps for these reasons, large majorities also think smaller high schools would especially benefit students with behavior problems (parents 71%, teachers 77%). Large majorities of parents (65%) and teachers (71%) speculate that smaller high schools are also better suited for helping students in large urban districts. One teacher was more than convinced, saying, “Small schools—especially high schools—are the answer to inner-city school problems!”

Parents' and Teachers' Impressions of Small High Schools

In your view, which school is more likely to have each of the following characteristics—a smaller high school with less than 500 students, or a larger high school with more than 1,000 students, or do you think there would be no difference?

% of respondents who say a *small* high school is more likely to have each of the following:

	Parents Overall	Teachers Overall
Small class size	70%	64%
Teachers who take a personal interest in students and really get to know them	70	56
Strong sense of belonging and community among the students	66	79
A low dropout rate	55	65
Strong parental involvement	53	52
Effective help for struggling students	50	58
Students who get high scores on achievement tests	47	30
High level of student participation in extracurricular activities and clubs (other than sports)	36	40
High levels of student participation in team sports	34	44
Strong support for teachers from principals and administrators	N/A	39
A heavy workload for teachers	N/A	35
Teachers who regularly meet to share ideas about lesson plans and methods of instruction	N/A	35
Strong emphasis on computers and technology to help students learn	21	18
A lot of cliques among students	11	14
A wide variety of courses	9	1
Students who are alienated or socially isolated	9	5
Racial and ethnic diversity in the student body	6	1
Students who bully or harass other students	5	3
A lot of discipline problems	3	2
Students who abuse drugs or alcohol	3	2

Where Benefits of Smaller Schools Are Not Clear-Cut

Despite these advantages, opinions about the benefits of small schools are less clear-cut on some issues. Only about 4 in 10 parents (41%) and teachers (36%) say the claim that students are safer from the threat of violence in small schools is probably right, while a similar number (38% of both) say it is probably wrong.

Opinions are also mixed when it comes to small schools' promise of better academic achievement. Teachers especially (57%) don't believe there's a difference between large and small high schools with regard to high scores on achievement tests, and 44% of parents agree. Meanwhile, although one might intuitively expect smaller schools to be more inviting and accessible to parents, many parents and teachers (43% and 41%, respectively) believe there would be no difference between small and large schools when it comes to parental involvement.

Large School Drawbacks

Parents, teachers and students do tend to associate some disturbing problems with larger schools. About 7 in 10 parents (68%) and teachers (70%) and nearly 8 in

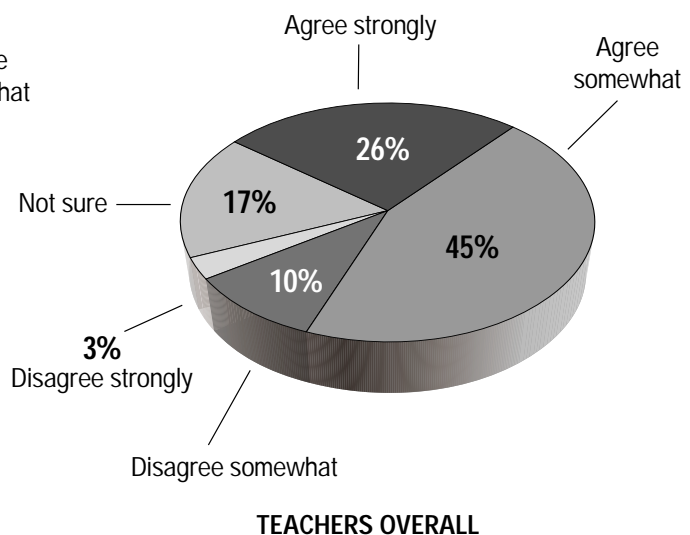
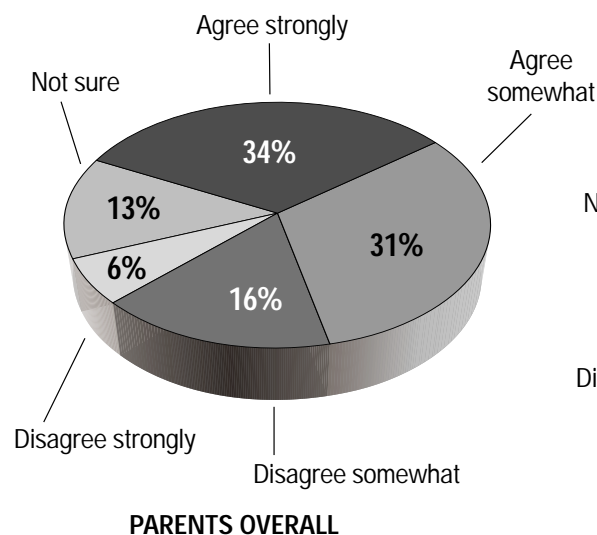
10 (79%) students expect that larger schools are more likely to have many discipline problems. "There's more teachers," said one mom, "but there's too many kids."

Respondents also believe that large high schools are more likely to have students who are alienated or socially isolated (56% of parents and 62% of teachers). One mother who saw an upside to larger schools also believed it came at a cost: "Bigger schools usually have more extras like theater and art and band and whatever. But then, when they get too big, kids just get lost." Meanwhile most assume that smaller schools foster a sense of belonging among students; 66% of parents and 79% of teachers think they are more likely to offer "a strong sense of belonging and community."

Almost 6 in 10 students (59%) and almost half of parents (48%) and teachers (44%) believe that in large high schools there would be a bigger problem with "students who bully or harass other students." One mother was concerned about her son who attends a large public high school in Boston. In the focus group she talked about how "he has been picked on a lot, to join this gang." Still, many parents and teachers don't think the number of students in a high school would make a difference in this regard (45% parents, 50% teachers).

Small High Schools Especially Helpful for Some

Small high schools would be especially good for students in large urban districts. Do you agree or disagree?



The Advantages of Large Schools

Most respondents believe large schools will excel and outperform small schools in two specific areas: having a more diverse student body and offering a wide selection of courses. Majorities of parents (59%), teachers (76%) and students (77%) envision large schools as more likely to have a more racially and ethnically diverse student body. (Recall that parents, teachers and students in small schools were far less likely to report more than a few African Americans or Hispanics in their student population.) Similarly, two-thirds of parents (67%) and even more teachers (88%) presume that larger schools are more likely to offer a wider variety of courses.

In their comments and responses, many parents and teachers express the beliefs that in small schools “there’s

less money for things like labs, elective courses and school equipment,” that “it’s tougher for students to switch out of a class if they’re having a hard time with a teacher,” and that “there are fewer opportunities to socialize and learn from different kinds of people.” One mother, from St. Louis, talked about one of the reasons she was glad her son was in a relatively large high school: “What if you don’t like the teacher you’ve got for that subject? And since your school’s small, then you might not have any other teachers to switch to.”

Still, all in all, most respondents—parents, teachers and students—see many positives in small schools, especially in the realm of teacher-student relations and helping students who struggle.

Students’ Impressions of Small High Schools

Now I am going to ask you to think about two high schools—a small high school with less than 500 students, and a large high school with more than 1,000 students. Where do you think the following would happen—the small high school, the large high school, or do you think there would be no difference?

% of students who say the following are more likely to happen in a *small* high school:

	Students Overall
Students would get more individual attention from teachers	88%
Teachers would really make an effort to know their students	70
Students would be safer from crime or violence	62
There would be higher student achievement	61
Students would have more opportunities to play team sports	41
It would be easier to make friends	36
School spirit would be strong	24
There would be a lot of cliques among students	16
There would be a bigger problem with students who bully or harass other students	12
There would be more racial and ethnic diversity among students	7
Student discipline would be a bigger problem	5

FINDING SEVEN: HOW COMMUNITIES MAY RESPOND

Large numbers of teachers and parents say they themselves would support proposals to break up large high schools in their own communities, but such initiatives are hardly likely to escape controversy. For many parents and teachers, other kinds of reforms seem more pressing, and these may compete for public attention and support. Teachers especially anticipate that proposals to break up high schools would generate broad community opposition.

By and large, parents and teachers see many advantages to small high schools, but does that mean they stand ready to support local districts in efforts to reduce school size? According to respondents in *Sizing Things Up*, leaders who believe their district should consider reducing school size cannot just assume broad community support.

A Split Decision

In this survey, parents and teachers in schools with more than 500 students were asked to describe what their initial reaction would be if their district announced it was going to break up their high school into smaller schools, each with fewer than 500 students. Almost half of parents (48%) and teachers (44%) say they would support their district on this idea. But approximately 1 in 4 parents (29%) and teachers (23%) would oppose such a proposal, and many say they would neither support nor oppose it (parents 20%, teachers 17%). That is, despite all of the positive assumptions parents and teachers make about small high schools, less than half of each group voices outright support for reducing high school size in their own district. In the focus groups, participants were often perplexed by the idea. “Physically, it couldn’t work. You’d have to break the floors down,” one parent said. The father of a student in a large Boston high school voiced a typical doubt: “It would probably be less expensive on the school system to give the teachers more money than tear [sic] down these big schools and building a bunch of little ones.”

What’s more, at least half of both parents (52%) and teachers (50%) think the idea would be too expensive and impractical. According to one teacher who participated in the study “breaking up schools is a costly, ineffective fad.” And a parent in a focus group in St.

Louis asked the moderator, “Why do we want to mess with something that’s already working? It’s not broken.”

Students: Keep Status Quo

As we saw in Finding Six, students, like adults, generally have a positive view of what small schools are typically like. But it may surprise no one that high school students are far less open to the idea of breaking up their own high school. More than 6 in 10 students (61%) in large schools think it would be a bad idea, and their main concern is that they would end up being

Other Reforms May Compete

Here are four different suggestions for improving high schools. Which of the four sounds most promising to you?

	Parents Overall	Teachers Overall
Reducing class size	27%	29%
— OR —		
Making discipline policies stronger	26%	32%
— OR —		
Breaking up large high schools into smaller ones	20%	14%
— OR —		
Raising teacher salaries	18%	23%

separated from their friends (54%). “I’d hate it,” said a sophomore from a school of 1,600 students in California. “What if you got split up from your friends?”

A Great Deal of Tension

Whatever their own views may be, teachers in particular envision a controversial and complicated debate should their districts take on the task of reducing the size of their high schools. Among those in the high schools with more than 500 students, nearly half of teachers (49%)—and 39% of parents—say that such a proposal would generate widespread opposition in their community. One teacher described the idea as “a management nightmare.”

And much may depend on how well local leaders present the idea and how much follow-through they provide in giving people a chance to understand and think about it. A Seattle teacher in a large high school, referring to proposals in his district, said, “Right now, we’re talking about really changing the model of our school in a big way. There is a great deal of tension. We haven’t had a direction because we haven’t had leadership. It’s a model that would disrupt those of us who have been teaching a long time. Some of us who have been teaching a long time are hopping on the bandwagon; others are not. But it’s created a great deal of tension and I think will continue to.” Asked by the moderator about the specific reform model his school is considering, he responded, “Well, if we knew exactly what it was going to be that might be helpful.”

Why Such Tepid Support?

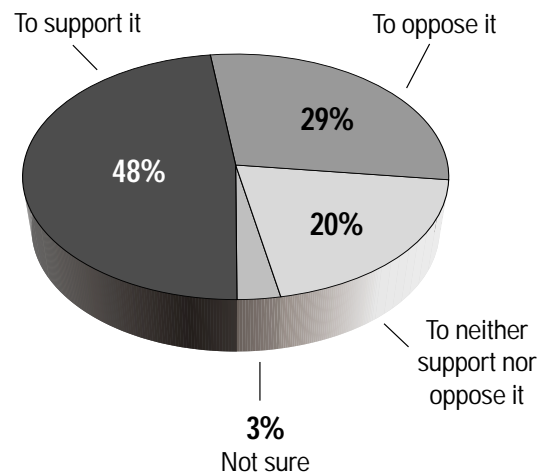
So what’s going on here? Why is support so tepid given such good first impressions about small high schools? To begin with, the idea of reducing school size is just one of a variety of education reforms that parents and teachers must consider, and it’s not necessarily the one they have given the most thought to. Only a third of parents (32%) and about half of teachers (45%) say they have given “a lot of thought” to the idea of reducing school size. Among parents who had a choice about which school their child would attend, 55% say that school size was “not too important” or “not important at all” in making their decision.

Landslide Victories Unlikely

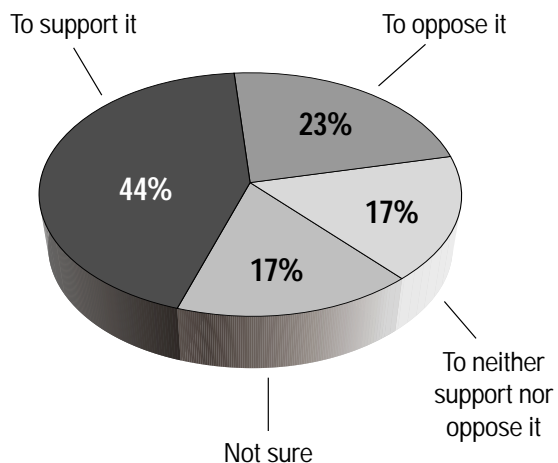
If your district announced it was planning to break up your high school into smaller schools with less than 500 students in each, what would be your gut reaction?

(Base: Respondents in high schools with more than 500 students)

PARENTS OVERALL



TEACHERS OVERALL



What Comes First?

Even when asked specifically about making high schools smaller, many parents and teachers see other approaches to improving schools as equally promising and valid. As the next finding will show, teachers consider reducing class size a far more important priority. When asked to choose among four different proposals for improving schools, relatively few parents or teachers jump immediately to the notion of making schools smaller. Just 20% of parents and 14% of teachers say this is the best idea. Larger numbers opt for stronger discipline or reducing class size. About 1 in 5 parents (18%) and teachers (23%) say improving teacher pay should come first.

How Big Is Too Big?

While it is certainly true that school leaders can pursue more than one improvement at a time, it is also true that most will have to make some choices about where to put their money, energy and time. What these findings suggest is that, for parents and teachers at least, reducing school size will not win hands down. One final challenge for small school advocates is that teachers and parents have very different definitions from those of experts regarding when a high school actually gets too large.

Many of the academic studies on the benefits of small high schools have looked at schools with 400 to 800 students. But results from this study show that teachers and parents accept much larger student bodies at the high school level. Most parents (61%), for example, say that a high school with 1,500 students is acceptable,

assuming it's not overcrowded. As one St. Louis parent put it: "I think we probably have between 1,200 and 1,500 kids. If we double it, that's staggering. If we cut it in half, that's baloney. We're going to be a little country town, hick little school then."

Some Groups More Open to Reform

Some of the data suggest that low-income or minority respondents are more open to the idea that reducing school size would

improve the education most students receive. For example, 6 out of 10 parents (60%) who earn under \$25,000 a year say they would support breaking up their high school into smaller schools, compared to just 37% of those earning \$75,000 or more. And well over half (58%) of African American and Hispanic parents, compared to 45% of white parents, say they would support such a reform.

"I think we probably have between 1,200 and 1,500 kids. If we double it, that's staggering. If we cut it in half, that's baloney. We're going to be a little country town, hick little school then."

—St. Louis parent

The openness of these groups to consider such a major change in their children's education may stem from the fact that they are generally more dissatisfied with the schools in their communities. In previous Public Agenda studies that asked about school satisfaction, findings indicate that minority parents are less satisfied than white parents overall and are more amenable to a variety of fundamental reforms such as vouchers.¹³

FINDING EIGHT: CLASS SIZE OR SCHOOL SIZE?

For teachers, reducing the size of their classes is a much higher priority than reducing the size of their schools. For both teachers and parents, class size is the more visible issue, and—at least right now—it is the issue that is more likely to prompt grassroots concern.

Anyone who introduces a new idea for improving education faces a series of hurdles no matter how well researched and how intuitively appealing the idea may be. People need to understand what is being proposed and how it might work. They need to understand how it will address the problems they care about most. They need to believe that the idea is practical and actually stands a good chance of being enacted. And, given the long list of improvements that could be made in education, they need to believe that this specific approach is among the most urgent. As noted in Finding Seven, reducing school size faces a number of contending reforms for public attention and support. And one particular idea—making classes smaller—may prove a strong contender indeed.

A Familiar Idea vs. a New One

Like most Public Agenda research projects, this study began with focus groups, a useful tool for uncovering people's assumptions and first impressions. In this instance, a series of focus groups with teachers and parents offered a powerful demonstration of how little thought people have given to the issue of high school size and how this issue compares to the other educational concerns people have.

Early on in each focus group, the moderator asked participants to suggest ways to improve local high schools. Participants typically served up a wide range of ideas—higher standards, better discipline, more parental involvement and more tax dollars devoted to education, among others—but almost no one suggested reducing school size. Even when moderators specifically introduced the topic, some participants just naturally assumed that the question was about making classes smaller, not making schools smaller. In effect, some of the parents and teachers “heard” what was already on their minds rather than what the moderator had actually asked.

The reality is that for most Americans, class size is a familiar topic and discussions about it are well-traveled territory. But outside the community of education experts and professionals, the idea of making schools smaller in order to improve learning is relatively new. And for teachers in particular, reducing the number of students in a high school seems to be decidedly less important than reducing the number of students in each classroom.

The Best Way to Improve Teaching

For teachers, reducing class size is a long-standing concern. In a 1996 Public Agenda study, 65% of teachers nationwide—and 83% of teachers in inner-city schools—said that classes in their own school were too crowded.¹⁴ In 2000, Public Agenda's survey of new teachers showed “reducing class size” easily topping a list of 11 different ideas for improving the quality of teaching.¹⁵

In focus groups for this and other Public Agenda projects, teachers frequently argue that smaller classes are needed if they are to meet the challenge the nation has set before them—

helping all children learn at higher levels. Teachers unions and other advocates for the profession often place smaller classes near the top of their agendas for school

change.¹⁶ In this study, concerns about class size clearly beat out concerns about school size. Seven in 10 of the high school teachers surveyed say that small class size is more important to student success than small school size. “You can have large schools with classes of 16, and small schools with classes of 30—we do,” wrote one teacher who participated in the survey.

But outside the community of education experts and professionals, the idea of making schools smaller in order to improve learning is relatively new.

“It’s Just Common Sense”

Parents too believe that small classes are good for education. A 1999 survey by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government showed that 75% of parents strongly favor reducing class size as a way to improve public schools in their own community. Two in 3 (67%) say small classes make a “great deal of difference” in how much high school students learn.¹⁷

What’s more, class size is generally one of the few “facts” about their child’s school that most parents actually know. A recent Public Agenda survey showed that less than a third of parents know a lot about their school’s dropout rate or how many students go on to college, but almost three-quarters know the average class size.¹⁸

For most parents, it makes intuitive sense that teachers can do a much better job if they work with smaller numbers of students, and many parents are convinced that their own child will get more attention and will thrive in smaller classes. “I think a smaller classroom

makes a big difference. I mean, it’s just common sense,” said a father from St. Louis.

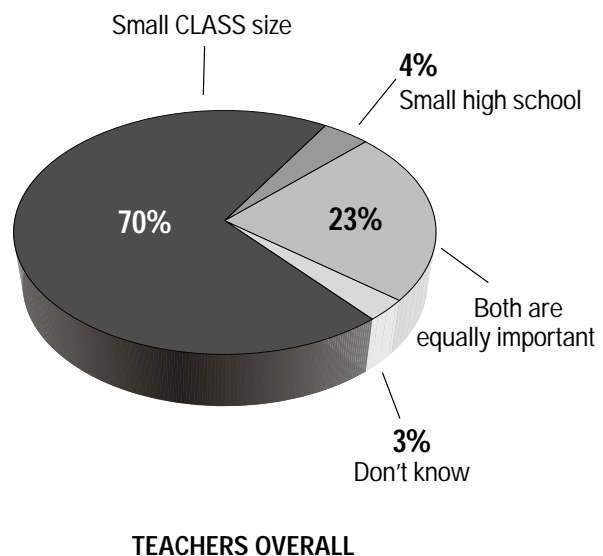
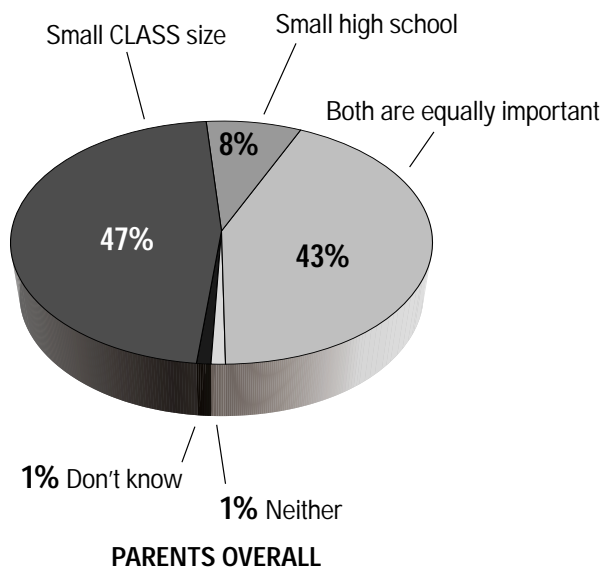
There is some evidence, however, that parents’ concerns on class size are less intense than those of teachers, and that, as a group, parents are more open to the idea that high school size might be an equally important consideration. When teachers are asked which is more important to student success, class size or school size, the vast majority opt for small classes (70%). When parents are presented with this same dilemma, 47% say small classes would be more important for their child, while 43% say class size and school size are equally important.

Avoiding a Painful Miscalculation

Most school districts do not, of course, face an explicit choice between small schools and small classes, and asking parents and teachers to compare their relative importance does not mean it’s impossible to have both. In fact, 70% of parents and 64% of teachers say they tend to assume that a smaller high school is more likely

Small Schools Vs. Small Classes

All other things being equal, which do you think is more important [for your child/for a students’ success]—to be in a small high school, to be in a high school that has small class size, or are they equally important?



to have small classes. Still, in a world with limited resources—and among leaders with limited time—most districts do have to make decisions about which to tackle first. Some ideas will be placed on the front burner while others simmer in back.

Sizing Things Up contains an important message for those who believe that smaller high schools have significant benefits for parents,

teachers and students:

Concern about class size hasn't gone away. For teachers especially, class size is generally a far more crucial and frustrating issue, and for parents it is far and away the more familiar one. Ignoring these realities, or assuming

that class size concerns can take a backseat while the conversation turns to reducing school size, could turn out to be a highly painful miscalculation.

Assuming that class size concerns can take a backseat while the conversation turns to reducing school size could turn out to be a highly painful miscalculation.

AFTERWORD

By Deborah Wadsworth

For over a decade Public Agenda has tried to report, clearly and without bias, the beliefs, concerns, and deeply held values of all the constituencies who have reason to concern themselves with the state of public education across the nation. Often, our findings confirm solidly entrenched convictions. Occasionally, we ourselves are surprised by perceptions that seem so at odds with prevailing wisdom. And, more regularly than one would expect, we unveil a substantial gap between experts and average citizens, a pattern that typically emerges when the discussion of an issue is highly evolved among leaders without having filtered through to the public. In *Sizing Things Up*, just such a pattern has emerged once again with leaders and the public in very different places about the relevance of size to good schooling at the secondary level.

Detailed and purposeful discussions of the effectiveness of small schools have been held among reformers for some time, propelled by an archive of research which they say conveys demonstrable evidence that smaller high schools are indeed preferable to larger ones in providing an environment in which students will soar intellectually and mature socially into responsible and capable young adults. Influential and effective advocates have begun to address the issue in meetings and in journal articles, and media coverage of the topic has grown—including a recent series in *Education Week*. But, Public Agenda's latest study makes clear that, to date, no comparable discussion has occurred among most parents, teachers and students. A yawning communications gap cries out to be addressed.

Sizing Things Up begins to address this need. For a start, the findings can add to the knowledge base about how large and small high schools are functioning through the eyewitness accounts from parents, teachers and students. It can also provide insight into what these three groups think of the "idea" of small schools as a way to improve secondary education and help students learn more.

Advocates of this reform will be heartened both by the reflections of parents and teachers on what they've

experienced and by their endorsement of the "idea" of smaller high schools.

Experiences of Largeness

Both groups concur that large schools have few advantages and many potential drawbacks. Parents whose youngsters attend large schools are somewhat more likely to say that their youngsters have greater difficulty in getting help when needed and are more likely to fall through the cracks through inattention.

These parents are also considerably more likely to say their schools' classes and hallways are overcrowded.

As for teachers, those in large schools agree

for the most part with parents' assessments and, in addition, they cite low academic achievement as a problem in greater numbers than do their counterparts in small schools. More than half of teachers in large schools report that too many students pass through the system without learning what they should. This, in light of headlines suggesting that in many communities high schools are getting bigger all the time.

Advocates of this reform will be heartened both by the reflections of parents and teachers on what they've experienced and by their endorsement of the "idea" of smaller high schools.

Assumptions about Smallness

Reinforcing these views are some very strong assumptions about the relative advantages of smaller schools, regardless of people's own experiences. Whether the desired outcome is greater individualized attention, a robust sense of community or better serving youngsters in urban areas, parents and teachers assume smaller schools will come through more effectively. And, when *Sizing Things Up* looks closely at the views of those who are presently experiencing small schools, greater levels of satisfaction do indeed exist among parents and teachers in some important areas.

One might logically conclude, therefore, that making schools smaller is an idea whose time has come. But a close reading of these findings also suggests some caveats that small schools advocates would do well to heed.

Not Ready for Prime Time

As evolved and detailed as this reform idea may be among leaders, it is most definitely not yet on the reform agenda of most parents or teachers. To the contrary—other reforms seem just as valid and important. For teachers in particular more energy is likely to be directed toward reducing the size of their classes than the size of their schools.

Unlike the advocates of small schools, neither parents nor teachers necessarily connect their long-standing concerns about discipline and struggling students with reducing the size of high schools. While those we interviewed found the idea of small schools in many ways very appealing, they confessed they hadn't thought much about it, and it didn't naturally occur to them as an antidote to the problems they've identified. Moreover, when urged to consider the idea, many voiced concern about whether such a restructuring would even be feasible in their communities.

Kids Themselves

It should surprise no one that most students like best what they know—their own high schools. Whether they are presently attending large or small schools, they are remarkably upbeat about their experiences, and those in large schools recoil at the idea of breaking up their school into smaller units. Any parent who has ever coped with a teenager presented with the problem of moving from one high school to another learns quickly just how attached most teens are to their school and friends.

Surprisingly, given the mounting evidence of student success in small schools, significant differences in the attitudes of the two groups of high school students that one might have expected were really quite modest. In part, this may be true because this research interviewed youngsters currently enrolled in all kinds of small

schools. Quite intentionally, it did not set out to identify a population presently attending “model” small schools that have been established as a part of larger secondary school reform initiatives. And not even the staunchest advocate of small schools would suggest that smallness is automatically synonymous with excellence.

Another possible explanation for the similarity of teens' attitudes is that the problems they identify seem to seep into their schools, regardless of size. The prevalence of drugs and cheating, the sound of profanity in hallways, the disrespect among peers—as well as disrespect for teachers—are conditions that appear to be ubiquitous. Though small schools may indeed have many virtues, it may be expecting far too much of them to suggest that size alone can provide the antidote to such tenacious and complex problems as these.

The prevalence of drugs and cheating, the sound of profanity in hallways, the disrespect among peers—as well as disrespect for teachers—are conditions that appear to be ubiquitous.

Unquestioned Growth

That said, it remains a fact that as school enrollments have skyrocketed, and the percentage of secondary schools with more than 1000 students has more than tripled,¹⁹ the trend to build still bigger schools and expand existing ones has gone on with relatively little questioning. Economies of scale and burgeoning bureaucracies to administer these behemoths seem to have fueled a trend that only recently has come under scrutiny.

A half-century ago, James B. Conant called for the creation of large, comprehensive high schools in an attempt to address significant societal problems.²⁰ The reform undoubtedly achieved some of what it set out to do, even as it spawned a new set of problems in its wake.

Today, one of the leading proponents of small schools, Tony Wagner, co-director of the Harvard School of Education's Change Leadership Group, applauds what he calls “new village schools” for their capacity to reverse the failures of bigness.²¹ He and others believe

these small and intimate environments will foster the development of the kind of teacher-student relationships that can nurture a strong sense of community, a shared responsibility for learning, and ultimately, success for students that would grow out of close collaboration between educators and parents. Such thinking has been gaining support rapidly among reformers, and such a model may indeed produce such outcomes.

It would be a disservice to all who care about public schools if the “small school idea” did not get a much broader hearing among parents, teachers, students and the public at large.

Cautionary Note

But a careful reading of *Sizing Things Up* suggests a need for some prudence before assuming we have an all-encompassing blueprint for reform. The challenge for those working to focus attention on secondary education and its failure to prepare so many youngsters for adult life is not to become so spellbound by still another magic bullet, a new immutable truth. Smaller high schools may indeed provide an antidote to some of the ills that plague education, but surely will not be the sole solution for every community in America.

Communities across the country owe it to themselves to consider whether their own high schools are too large, and whether reducing school size might be a good solution. And, it would be a tragedy for all of these groups

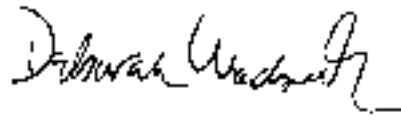
if the discussion about reducing school size were to deteriorate into the kind of divisive policy battles that occur so often around so many aspects of school reform.

Public Agenda’s research suggests that very few people outside the circle of reformers have yet to be really exposed to this idea.

Educational leaders have moved far ahead of the public in their discussions about reducing school size. Small may indeed be beautiful, but neither parents nor teachers in this study have yet

to identify large schools as their most serious concern. In many ways, such a blank slate can present a real opportunity for the kind of discussion that will be needed. Public engagement, an activity that has proved to be so elusive in most communities, will be critical for any change in this direction.

It would be a disservice to all who care about public schools if the “small school idea” did not get a much broader hearing among parents, teachers, students and the public at large.



Deborah Wadsworth
President
Public Agenda

SUPPORTING TABLES

TABLE ONE: Parents and Teachers Describe Their High Schools

Is this an accurate description of your [child's] high school, should things be a little better, or should things be a lot better?

% RESPONDING	PARENTS			TEACHERS		
	Overall (n=801)	Large Schools (n=268)	Small Schools (n=103)	Overall (n=920)	Large Schools (n=216)	Small Schools (n=348)
There is a wide variety of courses						
Accurate description	68	72	65	49	59	35
Should be a little better	22	18	27	37	31	46
Should be a lot better	9	8	8	14	9	19
School spirit is strong						
Accurate description	65	59	80	18	18	19
Should be a little better	21	22	18	42	40	42
Should be a lot better	10	13	3	39	41	39
There is a strong emphasis on computers and technology to help students learn						
Accurate description	58	54	67	49	52	52
Should be a little better	23	25	18	35	33	37
Should be a lot better	15	14	14	15	15	10
The school has high academic expectations for students and pushes them to do their very best						
Accurate description	55	53	68	36	40	37
Should be a little better	25	27	19	43	38	44
Should be a lot better	18	19	13	20	22	18
Parental involvement is strong						
Accurate description	50	47	52	19	18	21
Should be a little better	27	30	33	35	30	39
Should be a lot better	19	20	10	46	51	40
Students learn to speak and write well, with proper pronunciation and grammar						
Accurate description	50	47	64	20	21	19
Should be a little better	28	29	21	50	44	57
Should be a lot better	18	22	15	30	34	24

TABLE ONE: Parents and Teachers Describe Their High Schools (continued)

% RESPONDING	PARENTS			TEACHERS		
	Overall (n=801)	Large Schools (n=268)	Small Schools (n=103)	Overall (n=920)	Large Schools (n=216)	Small Schools (n=348)
Students score high on achievement tests						
Accurate description	44	41	56	22	24	24
Should be a little better	28	28	29	46	37	46
Should be a lot better	15	19	6	30	36	26
The teachers and principal know almost all the students by name						
Accurate description	41	23	68	42	13	82
Should be a little better	23	27	18	30	36	13
Should be a lot better	21	31	5	24	43	4
Students are civil and respectful toward each other						
Accurate description	39	36	49	18	16	22
Should be a little better	31	30	37	49	51	49
Should be a lot better	26	31	13	33	33	29
Struggling students get effective help						
Accurate description	39	36	50	35	35	43
Should be a little better	23	23	22	48	44	45
Should be a lot better	24	27	21	17	20	12
Most students participate in extracurricular activities or clubs (other than sports)						
Accurate description	N/A	N/A	N/A	29	24	35
Should be a little better	N/A	N/A	N/A	39	39	39
Should be a lot better	N/A	N/A	N/A	31	37	25
Teachers regularly meet to share ideas about lesson plans and methods of instruction						
Accurate description	N/A	N/A	N/A	19	22	22
Should be a little better	N/A	N/A	N/A	37	38	33
Should be a lot better	N/A	N/A	N/A	44	41	43

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

TABLE TWO: Students Describe Their High Schools

Please tell me if the following statements about school are true at your high school, if things should be a little better, or if things should be a lot better.

% RESPONDING	STUDENTS		
	Overall (n=1008)	Large Schools (n=379)	Small Schools (n=102)
School spirit is strong			
True at your school	69	70	75
Should be a little better	21	20	17
Should be a lot better	10	9	8
There are a lot of courses to choose from			
True at your school	68	76	53
Should be a little better	24	18	29
Should be a lot better	8	6	17
The school has high academic expectations for students and pushes them to do their very best			
True at your school	64	67	61
Should be a little better	26	23	28
Should be a lot better	9	9	12
A lot of students come from different racial and ethnic backgrounds			
True at your school	62	73	39
Should be a little better	24	18	32
Should be a lot better	12	8	28
Students learn to speak and write well, with proper pronunciation and grammar			
True at your school	58	56	58
Should be a little better	31	32	29
Should be a lot better	10	11	11
Students who are falling behind get the help they need			
True at your school	58	52	65
Should be a little better	30	34	22
Should be a lot better	11	12	13

TABLE TWO: Students Describe Their High Schools (continued)

% RESPONDING	STUDENTS		
	Overall (n=1008)	Large Schools (n=379)	Small Schools (n=102)
There's a strong emphasis on computers and technology			
True at your school	58	60	54
Should be a little better	29	26	34
Should be a lot better	12	12	11
It's easy for new kids to make friends			
True at your school	55	53	60
Should be a little better	32	31	28
Should be a lot better	11	13	12
Many parents are very involved with school activities			
True at your school	48	49	57
Should be a little better	34	32	31
Should be a lot better	15	15	11
Students get high scores on achievement tests			
True at your school	38	42	39
Should be a little better	37	35	43
Should be a lot better	13	11	11
Students treat each other with respect			
True at your school	30	31	35
Should be a little better	49	48	47
Should be a lot better	21	21	18

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

TABLE THREE: Problems in School — The Parents’ and Teachers’ Perspectives

Here are some problems that high schools could have. How serious is each problem at your [child’s] school— very serious, somewhat serious, not too serious, or not a problem at all?

% RESPONDING	PARENTS			TEACHERS		
	Overall (n=801)	Large Schools (n=268)	Small Schools (n=103)	Overall (n=920)	Large Schools (n=216)	Small Schools (n=348)
Too many students abuse drugs or alcohol						
Very/somewhat serious problem	55	60	52	57	53	58
Not too serious/not a problem	31	27	40	36	37	37
Too many students fall through the cracks						
Very/somewhat serious problem	47	55	30	43	51	31
Not too serious/not a problem	42	33	56	55	47	67
Too many students get passed through the system without learning						
Very/somewhat serious problem	44	49	36	46	51	39
Not too serious/not a problem	47	39	56	52	48	59
Too many students have poor academic skills*						
Very/somewhat serious problem	44	48	33	48	52	42
Not too serious/not a problem	43	39	60	52	47	58
Class size is too big						
Very/somewhat serious problem	43	52	21	44	65	21
Not too serious/not a problem	52	45	74	56	35	79
Too many teachers are just going through the motions						
Very/somewhat serious problem	43	46	33	27	35	20
Not too serious/not a problem	49	45	63	72	63	80
Hallways are too crowded						
Very/somewhat serious problem	41	54	15	34	55	14
Not too serious/not a problem	44	31	75	65	46	85
Too many students bully or harass other students						
Very/somewhat serious problem	38	41	27	26	28	26
Not too serious/not a problem	54	50	68	71	68	73
Too many students drop out						
Very/somewhat serious problem	36	43	21	37	47	32
Not too serious/not a problem	50	41	71	61	51	67
Too many students are alienated and socially isolated						
Very/somewhat serious problem	35	40	23	29	34	25
Not too serious/not a problem	51	44	69	67	61	74
Few extracurricular activities and clubs are offered, other than sports						
Very/somewhat serious problem	24	26	22	17	12	20
Not too serious/not a problem	71	69	73	83	88	80
Insufficient parental involvement						
Very/somewhat serious problem	N/A	N/A	N/A	60	63	53
Not too serious/not a problem	N/A	N/A	N/A	40	36	47

*Teacher wording: “Academic achievement is too low”

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

TABLE FOUR: Problems in School — The Students' Perspective

Here are some problems that high schools could have. How serious of a problem is this in your high school—very serious, somewhat serious, not too serious or not serious at all?

% RESPONDING	STUDENTS		
	Overall (n=1008)	Large Schools (n=379)	Small Schools (n=102)
Too many students just go along with the crowd instead of thinking for themselves			
Very/somewhat serious problem	65	69	57
Not too serious/not at all	34	29	42
Hallways are too crowded			
Very/somewhat serious problem	64	71	42
Not too serious/not at all	35	29	57
Too many students abuse drugs or alcohol			
Very/somewhat serious problem	62	64	55
Not too serious/not at all	35	32	41
Too many students cheat on tests and assignments			
Very/somewhat serious problem	43	42	43
Not too serious/not at all	55	55	52
Too many students get away with not doing their homework			
Very/somewhat serious problem	41	43	37
Not too serious/not at all	58	55	62
Too many students get passed through the system without learning			
Very/somewhat serious problem	37	41	36
Not too serious/not at all	60	56	62
Classes are overcrowded			
Very/somewhat serious problem	36	48	20
Not too serious/not at all	63	52	80
Too many students bully and harass other students			
Very/somewhat serious problem	32	34	32
Not too serious/not at all	67	66	68
Too many students get away with cutting class			
Very/somewhat serious problem	30	38	17
Not too serious/not at all	69	61	83
Too many students are loners and don't have friends			
Very/somewhat serious problem	22	24	14
Not too serious/not at all	77	74	86
There are hardly any after-school activities and clubs			
Very/somewhat serious problem	9	9	15
Not too serious/not at all	90	91	84

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

TABLE FIVE: Students' Personal Experiences in High School

Do these statements describe you a lot, a little, or not at all?

% RESPONDING	STUDENTS		
	Overall (n=1008)	Large Schools (n=379)	Small Schools (n=102)
I have very close friends at school who I can really count on			
A lot	80	79	82
A little	16	18	17
Not at all	3	3	1
Doing well in school makes me feel good about myself			
A lot	78	78	76
A little	20	21	17
Not at all	2	1	8
I work very hard in school so I can get into college			
A lot	69	68	67
A little	27	29	29
Not at all	4	3	4
My parents would be very disappointed if I do not go to college			
A lot	69	72	62
A little	23	21	27
Not at all	6	6	8
My group of friends at school are trusted and liked by the teachers			
A lot	60	57	56
A little	32	35	32
Not at all	7	8	11
I really care about my school			
A lot	48	44	51
A little	44	48	42
Not at all	8	7	7
I could do better in my classes but I would have to give up too many things that I enjoy			
A lot	20	20	15
A little	50	51	50
Not at all	30	29	35

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

TABLE SIX: Students' Attitudes Towards Their Teachers

How many of your teachers do the following—almost all of your teachers, only some, or very few?

% RESPONDING	STUDENTS		
	Overall (n=1008)	Large Schools (n=379)	Small Schools (n=102)
Know a lot about the subject they teach			
All/almost all	81	79	82
Only some	15	17	13
Very few	4	4	5
Treat students with respect			
All/almost all	75	75	81
Only some	18	17	15
Very few	7	7	4
Give students extra help when they fall behind			
All/almost all	67	64	61
Only some	25	27	26
Very few	8	9	14
Challenge students to constantly do better and learn more			
All/almost all	63	64	67
Only some	29	29	22
Very few	7	7	12
Let parents know quickly when students are falling behind in class			
All/almost all	52	45	60
Only some	32	37	28
Very few	15	16	13
Take a personal interest in students and really get to know them			
All/almost all	44	44	48
Only some	40	41	37
Very few	16	15	15

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

TABLE SEVEN: Parents' and Teachers' Perceptions of Small vs. Large High Schools

In your view, which school is more likely to have each of the following characteristics — a smaller high school with less than 500 students, a larger high school with more than 1,000 students, or do you think there would be no difference?

% RESPONDING	PARENTS OVERALL (n=801)	TEACHERS OVERALL (n=920)
Small class size		
Smaller high school	70	64
Larger high school	5	4
No difference	22	29
Teachers who take a personal interest in students and really get to know them		
Smaller high school	70	56
Larger high school	1	1
No difference	29	42
Strong sense of belonging and community among the students		
Smaller high school	66	79
Larger high school	4	1
No difference	27	17
A low dropout rate		
Smaller high school	55	65
Larger high school	14	9
No difference	28	22
Strong parental involvement		
Smaller high school	53	52
Larger high school	3	2
No difference	43	41
Effective help for struggling students		
Smaller high school	50	58
Larger high school	16	11
No difference	31	29
Students who get high scores on achievement tests		
Smaller high school	47	30
Larger high school	6	9
No difference	44	57
High levels of student participation in extracurricular activities and clubs (other than sports)		
Smaller high school	36	40
Larger high school	26	27
No difference	36	31
High levels of student participation in team sports		
Smaller high school	34	44
Larger high school	26	24
No difference	39	30
Strong emphasis on computers and technology to help students learn		
Smaller high school	21	18
Larger high school	31	34
No difference	46	45

TABLE SEVEN: Parents' and Teachers' Perceptions of Small vs. Large High Schools (continued)

% RESPONDING	PARENTS OVERALL (n=801)	TEACHERS OVERALL (n=920)
A lot of cliques among students		
Smaller high school	11	14
Larger high school	46	49
No difference	41	35
A wide variety of courses		
Smaller high school	9	1
Larger high school	67	88
No difference	23	10
Students who are alienated or socially isolated		
Smaller high school	9	5
Larger high school	56	62
No difference	34	31
Racial and ethnic diversity in the student body		
Smaller high school	6	1
Larger high school	59	76
No difference	31	21
Students who bully or harass other students		
Smaller high school	5	3
Larger high school	48	44
No difference	45	50
A lot of discipline problems		
Smaller high school	3	2
Larger high school	68	70
No difference	28	26
Students who abuse drugs or alcohol		
Smaller high school	3	2
Larger high school	40	27
No difference	56	68
A heavy workload for teachers		
Smaller high school	N/A	35
Larger high school	N/A	29
No difference	N/A	33
Strong support for teachers from principals and administrators		
Smaller high school	N/A	39
Larger high school	N/A	3
No difference	N/A	55
Teachers who regularly meet to share ideas about lesson plans and methods of instruction		
Smaller high school	N/A	35
Larger high school	N/A	10
No difference	N/A	48

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

TABLE EIGHT: Students' Perceptions of Small vs. Large High Schools

I am going to ask you to think about two high schools — a small high school with less than 500 students, and a large high school with more than 1,000 students. Where do you think the following would happen — the small high school, the large high school, or do you think there would be no difference?

% RESPONDING	STUDENTS OVERALL (n=1008)
Students would get more individual attention from teachers	
Small high school	88
Large high school	2
No difference	10
Teachers would really make an effort to know their students	
Small high school	70
Large high school	5
No difference	25
Students would be safer from crime or violence	
Small high school	62
Large high school	7
No difference	31
There would be higher student achievement	
Small high school	61
Large high school	13
No difference	25
Students would have more opportunities to play team sports	
Small high school	41
Large high school	43
No difference	16
It would be easier to make friends	
Small high school	36
Large high school	37
No difference	26
School spirit would be strong	
Small high school	24
Large high school	40
No difference	36
There would be a lot of cliques among students	
Small high school	16
Large high school	56
No difference	26
There would be a bigger problem with students who bully or harass other students	
Small high school	12
Large high school	59
No difference	28
There would be more racial and ethnic diversity among students	
Small high school	7
Large high school	77
No difference	16
Student discipline would be a bigger problem	
Small high school	5
Large high school	79
No difference	16

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

TABLE NINE: Parents' and Teachers' Assumptions about the Advantages of Small High Schools

Supporters of small high schools say that small high schools offer a number of advantages for students. For each of the following, please indicate if you think they are probably right, probably wrong, or if you are not sure.

% RESPONDING	PARENTS OVERALL (n=801)	TEACHERS OVERALL (n=920)
IN SMALLER HIGH SCHOOLS...		
It's easier to spot troubled students		
Probably right	80	85
Probably wrong	11	8
Not sure	10	8
It's easier for teachers to tailor instruction to individual needs because they know the students so well		
Probably right	76	65
Probably wrong	14	22
Not sure	11	13
It's easier to spot teachers who are doing a very bad job		
Probably right	69	69
Probably wrong	16	18
Not sure	15	13
Students score higher on achievement tests		
Probably right	43	29
Probably wrong	24	33
Not sure	33	38
Students are safer from the threat of violence		
Probably right	41	36
Probably wrong	38	38
Not sure	21	26
It's easier for the school to identify hands-off parents and persuade them to become more involved		
Probably right	N/A	66
Probably wrong	N/A	16
Not sure	N/A	18

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

TABLE TEN: Parents' and Teachers' Assumptions about the Drawbacks of Small High Schools

On the other hand, some people say that there are drawbacks to small high schools. For each of the following, please indicate if you think they are probably right, probably wrong, or if you are not sure.

% RESPONDING	PARENTS OVERALL (n=801)	TEACHERS OVERALL (n=920)
IN SMALLER HIGH SCHOOLS...		
There's less money for things like labs, elective courses and school equipment		
Probably right	57	56
Probably wrong	24	26
Not sure	19	18
It's tougher for students to switch out of a class if they're having a hard time with a teacher		
Probably right	54	70
Probably wrong	29	20
Not sure	18	9
There are fewer opportunities to socialize and learn from different kinds of people		
Probably right	46	59
Probably wrong	37	31
Not sure	17	10
Gifted and talented students have fewer opportunities to take honors and advanced placement courses		
Probably right	45	72
Probably wrong	37	18
Not sure	18	10
Too many teachers have to teach outside their area of expertise		
Probably right	38	40
Probably wrong	32	38
Not sure	30	23
Once students develop a bad reputation, it's hard for them to overcome it		
Probably right	N/A	64
Probably wrong	N/A	22
Not sure	N/A	14

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

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METHODOLOGY

Sizing Things Up is based on three nationwide surveys with 801 parents of children in public high schools, 920 public high school teachers and 1,008 public high school students. The surveys of parents and teachers were conducted in Spring 2001, and the survey of students in Fall 2001. In preparation for the fielding of the surveys, Public Agenda conducted 11 focus groups, a thorough literature review and a series of in-depth interviews with education experts.

The Survey of Parents and Students

Telephone interviews were conducted with 801 parents (or guardians) of high school students between May 17 and June 11, 2001, and with 1,008 high school students between October 1 and October 11, 2001. The parent interviews averaged 20 minutes and the student interviews 15 minutes. The interviews were conducted using a random sample of households and a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the 48 contiguous states had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. The margin of error for both the parent and student samples is plus or minus three percentage points; it is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups.

The Survey of Teachers

Public Agenda mailed questionnaires to a sample of 5,000 randomly selected high school teachers. The initial questionnaire was mailed on May 8, 2001, a reminder postcard was sent on May 17, and a second mailing of the questionnaire was mailed on May 24. All responses received through June 15 were tabulated. The process netted responses from 920 teachers in the general sample, for a response rate of 23%. The margin of error for the sample of 920 teachers is plus or minus three percentage points.

Teachers from schools with fewer than 500 students were oversampled to insure a sufficient number of responses. When the study reports results for “small school teachers” (n=348), it pools the oversampled

teachers with the small school teachers appearing naturally in the general sample. A total of 167 small school teachers were garnered from the oversample, and 181 from the general sample.

Teacher samples were randomly drawn from a comprehensive national database of high school teachers, supplied by Market Data Retrieval, a company of the Dun and Bradstreet Corporation. Both the mail and telephone surveys were fielded by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc. of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Verification of School Enrollment

An important part of the analysis in this study is the comparison of the experiences of respondents affiliated with large and small high schools. Public Agenda independently verified school enrollment for 92% of parents, 83% of teachers and 94% of students using the American Schools Directory Online (www.asd.com), a regularly updated database with vital statistics on every school in the United States. Respondents who did not answer questions about school name, town or county could not be verified and were excluded from the large and small school subgroups.

The Questionnaires

The questionnaires were designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instruments and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

The Focus Groups

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying the public’s attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn

from them to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews. A total of 11 focus groups were conducted in the first half of 2001 with parents, teachers and students in seven cities: Boston, MA; Frisco, TX; Independence, OH; Seattle, WA; St. Louis, MO; Walnut Creek, CA; and White Plains, NY. In-depth interviews were conducted with six education experts and practitioners who are knowledgeable about the topic of small high school reform.

Comparing the Samples of Large and Small School Respondents

Throughout the study, comparisons are made between respondents affiliated with large high schools, defined as having student enrollment of 1,500 or more, and small high schools, defined as having student enrollment of 500 or fewer students. The following tables provide a demographic comparison of the large and small high school samples for each group.

DEMOGRAPHIC TABLE 1: A Comparison of Large and Small High School Teachers

	Large High School Teachers ≥1500 students (n=216)	Small High School Teachers ≤500 students (n=348)
Sex		
Male	41	43
Female	59	57
Years of experience as a public school teacher		
<5 years	13	17
5–10 years	21	16
11–15 years	16	17
16–20 years	13	14
More than 20 years	38	37
Urbanicity of school		
Urban	41	8
Suburban	41	8
Small town/Rural	17	85
Respondents' estimated proportion of students in school who are eligible for free lunch		
<25%	31	16
25%–49%	27	31
≥50%	26	31
Respondents' estimated proportion of students in school who are African American or Hispanic		
Virtually all/Most	31	11
Some	44	17
Few	23	59
None	1	13

DEMOGRAPHIC TABLE 2: A Comparison of Large and Small High School Parents

	Large High School Parents ≥1500 students (n=268)	Small High School Parents ≤500 students (n=103)
Sex		
Male	39	46
Female	61	54
Race		
White	77	87
African American	11	4
Hispanic	11	9
Education		
High school graduate or less	29	41
Some college	27	34
Bachelors and above	44	25
Income		
Under \$25,000	14	19
\$25,000 to less than \$75,000	49	55
\$75,000 or more	36	26
Free/reduced lunch		
Child receives	15	17
Child does not receive	83	82
Urbanicity		
Urban	39	10
Suburban	54	36
Rural	7	54
Region		
Northeast	12	14
Midwest	22	39
South	36	25
West	30	22
Respondents' estimated proportion of students in school who are African American or Hispanic		
Virtually all/Most	20	11
Some	41	19
Few	32	54
None	1	14

DEMOGRAPHIC TABLE 3: A Comparison of Large and Small High School Students

	Large High School Students ≥1500 students (n=379)	Small High School Students ≤500 students (n=102)
Sex		
Male	49	49
Female	51	51
Race		
White	75	87
African American	10	8
Hispanic	11	3
Grade		
Ninth	22	29
Tenth	29	28
Eleventh	25	21
Twelfth	24	28
Free/reduced lunch		
Receives	12	18
Does not receive	87	81
Urbanicity		
Urban	59	28
Suburban	38	21
Rural	4	51
Region		
Northeast	14	11
Midwest	18	44
South	38	26
West	30	20
Respondents' estimated proportion of students in school who are African American or Hispanic		
Virtually all/Most	20	10
Some	48	25
Few	30	49
None	1	15

Note: Percentages in Demographic Tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

RELATED PUBLIC AGENDA PUBLICATIONS/VIDEOS

Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett and Tony Foleno, with Patrick Foley. Policymakers and educators will discover useful and surprising insights on what most school leaders nationwide say stands in the way of their providing vision and leadership—even in the most troubled schools. The survey also reveals what these administrators have to say about issues of tenure, “unfunded” mandates and other critical concerns and is especially timely as school leaders face increased pressure to raise academic standards and as some education experts predict a shortage of top school administrators over the next few years. 2001. 50 pp. \$10. ISBN 1-889483-74-5

Just Waiting to Be Asked? A Fresh Look at Attitudes on Public Engagement Steve Farkas, Patrick Foley and Ann Duffett, with Tony Foleno and Jean Johnson. School district leaders say they are eager for public engagement in educational decision making, but the venue they rely on most — the school board meeting — is primarily seen as a vehicle for the most vocal and disgruntled citizens. Teachers, of all the groups surveyed, feel the most ignored. Parents and the public would like to see more community involvement, but two-thirds say they're comfortable leaving decisions to the professionals. But those who rate their schools poorly are more likely to want to get directly involved. 2001. 48 pp. \$10. ISBN 1-889483-72-9

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