

Walter L. Cohen Alumni Association

Position Paper

Size Matters – Renovate Walter L. Cohen High School

POSITION

The Walter L. Cohen Alumni Association(WLCAA), supports the Recovery School District, a system that recognizes and espouses each child’s right to receive a quality education; specifically, learning experiences that enhance academic skills, builds character, and promotes positive behavior and self-confidence.

The WLCAA believes that relocating Walter L. Cohen High School and merging it with Booker T. Washington High School at the 1201 South Roman site will create a mega school facility at said site that is not in the best interest of Cohen students, Booker T. Washington students and the community in which they reside. Furthermore, we firmly believe such a consolidation of these two historic schools threatens the proud traditions and legacies of both Walter L. Cohen and Booker T. Washington.

SCHOOL SIZE MATTERS

It is rare that a community has the opportunity to select between large and small school models. Such a decision should be made with the best possible understanding of the educational and social implications for the children whose lives will be affected.

There is remarkable consistency among the research studies on school size and effectiveness. These studies indicate that **SMALL IS BETTER**

Current research findings on school size and effectiveness conclude that :

- Large high schools, particularly those serving low-income students, have disproportionately lower achievement and higher incidences of violence than smaller schools serving similar student populations; and

- In small schools, students tend to be more satisfied, more academically productive, more likely to participate in school activities, better behaved and less likely to drop out than students in large schools.

Another conclusion that emerges is that the benefits of small schools are greater for minority students or those of low socioeconomic status (SES).

Thus larger schools are discriminatory against such students and those who are academically marginal (Baker and Gump,1964; Fowler and Walberg,1991).

Factors Affected by School Size

The following factors are taken largely from Cotton’s extensive analysis of the research literature (Cotton, 1996)

Academic Achievement

- Smaller schools show positive effects on the achievement of ethnic minority students and those of low socioeconomic status.

Student Attitudes

- Research on student attitudes strongly favor small schools over large ones, with minority and low-SES students again showing the most positive benefits from a small-school environment.

Social Behavior

- Small schools have lower incidences of negative social behavior than large schools, with minority and low SES students showing the most positive effects from smaller schools.

Extracurricular Participation

- Students in small schools are involved in a greater variety of activities than those in larger schools.

Attendance

- Attendance statistics again favor small schools over large schools.

Dropouts

- Nine of ten reports reviewed, show lower dropout rates for smaller schools

Belongingness/Alienation

- Researchers report a greater sense of community and belonging among students of smaller schools

Self-Concept

- Personal and academic self-regard are stronger in smaller schools.

SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Violent activities inside the urban schools have been a major cause of concern. A survey conducted by the National Center of Education in 2008 suggest that urban schools contribute about 78 % of the total cases of violence.

School shootings have intensified concerns that many students get lost in large, impersonal schools and some become tragically alienated. At the same time, the push for higher achievement and the quest to narrow the achievement gap between poor students who are often African American and Latino and those from middle- and upper-income families have led to questions about the role school size plays in student learning and violence.

From the perspective of both safety and academics, new studies and experience from the 1990s have strengthened an already notable consensus on school size: **SMALLER IS BETTER.** There is overwhelming evidence that violence is less likely in smaller schools.

Several major benefits found to derive from small schools include:

- Violence and behavior problems diminish.
- Truancy, class-room disorder, vandalism, aggressive behavior, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation all decrease.
- Attendance is higher: dropouts fewer
- Extracurricular participation increases.
- Poor and minority students benefit most

RENOVATE or REPLACE – WALTER L. COHEN HIGH SCHOOL

Data compiled by numerous sources show: if all project costs are considered, the average cost, per square foot, of new schools is nearly twice the cost of renovations and additions. Additionally, large, new schools are actually more expensive to operate. In addition, most new school buildings actually require more maintenance over time, since they lack the quality construction of an earlier era.

Experience has shown that many school districts may be unfamiliar with, or biased against, renovation alternatives, so cost estimates for school renovations are sometimes inflated.

In a CityBusiness article; “Master plan review reveals spending discrepancies for repairing, replacing schools” by Ben Myers (August 18, 2011) it is stated that New Orleans educators, as well as the city’s civic and business leaders are questioning how a 1.6 billion dollar master plan proposal excludes more than one quarter of the renovations and new buildings deemed necessary.

The WLCAA endorses the small school model advocated by Ben Kleban the New Orleans College Prep Director. Kleban, states in the above article that planning for more high schools with smaller footprints is more equitable and efficient . He further states you can build more of them, serve more communities, serve more kids, and, at the same time, save financial resources in perpetuity.

CONCLUSION

Small schools are not a panacea, but they may be a key ingredient of a comprehensive approach to student success. Especially for high schools, which often seem impervious to change, small size is increasingly becoming part of any serious reform effort. Attention to size may be particularly important in turning around low performance and giving poor and minority students the extra boost that a community of caring, competence, and high expectations offers. Finally, a more-human scale is a potent antidote to student alienation. While impersonal bigness may actually provoke disruptive or violent behavior, small schools conducive to trust and respect tend to defuse it (WestEd, October 2001).

To build a mega school building and merge two large urban high schools, suggest that the Recovery School District rejects numerous research studies, that conclude: such schools have disproportionately lower achievement and higher incidences of violence. Additionally, researchers have also concluded: large schools are discriminatory against minority students and students of low socioeconomic status.

CALL TO ACTION

The Walter L. Cohen Alumni Association, urges Cohen Alumnus, Booker T. Washington Alumnus, parents, community leaders, concerned citizens, civic, public policy and business organizations, to support the efforts of the WLCAA to prevent the relocation of Cohen and merging Cohen and Booker T. Washington into a mega school.

Additionally, we must publically make the case for the renovation of Cohen and insist that it happens.

QUESTION

HOW CAN THE RECOVERY SCHOOL DISTRICT JUSTIFY SPENDING 31.7 MILLION DOLLARS TO REPLACE A BUILDING THAT CAN BE RENOVATED FOR 18.4 MILLION DOLLARS. ? (taken from RSD Assessment Survey conducted by Jacobs/CSRS Management – February 2011)

REFERENCES

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