

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE
Los Angeles Unified School District

INFORMATIVE

TO: Julie Slayton, Director
Research and Planning Division

DATE: June 16, 2008

FROM: Jeffrey White, Chief Research Scientist
Research and Planning Division

SUBJECT: RESEARCH ON SMALLER SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

This informative explores the issue of school size and student behavior and achievement outcomes in light of the recent Board of Education Resolution, *Small Schools II: A Bold Vision for the Los Angeles Unified School District*.

Compared to all California schools, LAUSD schools are larger, on average

Using the most recent data files from the California Department of Education, we merged the Academic Performance Index data with the California Basic Educational Data System files on school enrollment. Table 1 presents the average 2006-07 school enrollment for all California and LAUSD elementary, middle, and senior high schools.

Table 1
2006-07 Mean Enrollment for All California and LAUSD Schools by School Level

School Level	All California Schools			LAUSD Schools		
	N Schools	N Students	Mean Enrollment	N Schools	N Students	Mean Enrollment
Elementary	4,815	2,537,536	527	472	314,704	667
Middle	1,218	1,226,773	1,007	85	146,758	1,727
Senior High	1,162	1,751,700	1,507	96	185,170	1,929

Source: CDE 2006-07 CBEDS enrollment data combined with CDE 2007 Base API score data

These data indicate that compared to all California schools, LAUSD schools are larger, on average. While LAUSD elementary schools are only slightly larger than California elementary schools (667 compared to 527 students), secondary schools are considerably larger than the California average. LAUSD middle schools are almost 75% larger than the California average (1,727 compared to 1,007 students), with 60% of schools in the top 10 percent of all schools by size. LAUSD senior high schools are 28% larger than the California average (1,929 compared to 1,507 students), with 34% of schools in the top 10% of all schools by size. After excluding charter schools, which are typically smaller, the average LAUSD senior high size rose to over 2,600 students; 70% larger than the average California, non-charter senior high school.

Smaller schools and communities promote positive behavioral and attitudinal outcomes

Research studies indicate that smaller schools and learning communities can promote positive outcomes for students attending urban schools. All other factors being equal, small high schools yield higher attendance and graduation rates, increased promotion from 9th to 10th grade, lower dropout rates, and a safer and more orderly environment than large schools. Increased college-going rates, extracurricular participation, teacher attitudes and satisfaction, and curriculum

quality are all positively correlated with small schools (Fine & Somerville, 1998). When Smaller Learning Communities (SLCs) are well operated and implemented under the right conditions, they can yield the benefits of small schools (Cotton, 2001).

One of the clearest benefits of SLCs and smaller schools is the personalization of instruction. Personalization allows teachers to act on behalf of their students and monitor their progress more closely (Wallach & Lear, 2005). When students and teachers have more positive relationships with each other (Lambert & Lowry, 2004), student engagement, academic self-concept, and satisfaction with academic progress increase (AIR, 2005). When students are well known by teachers, they are less inclined to *fall between the cracks*. Troubled students may be less likely to withdraw from school because teachers and others will notice their absence in a small environment (Cotton, 2001). Other immediate advantages of SLCs include higher attendance, lower dropout rates and a reduction in violent incidents (Wasley et al., 2000).

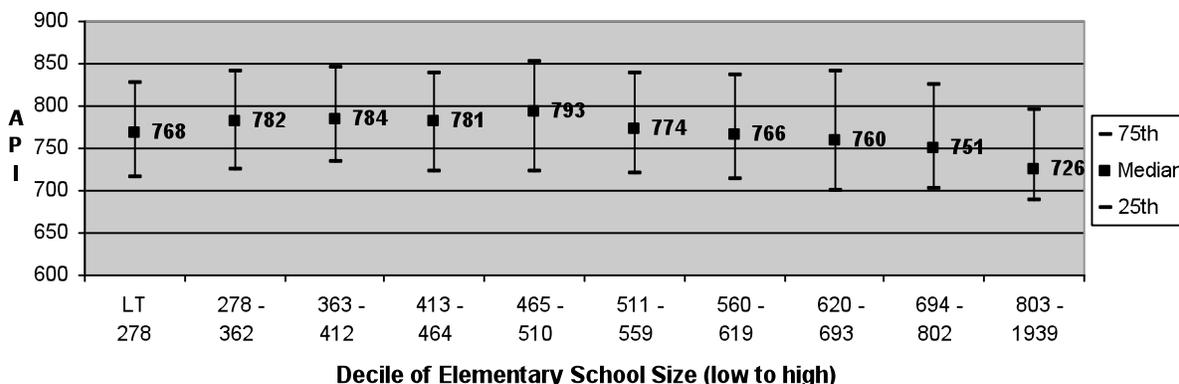
The link between achievement and smaller schools and communities is inconclusive

While SLCs can foster personalization and a more positive school climate, the link between SLCs, personalization, and improved academic achievement is less clear. Some studies found increased academic achievement and graduation rates in schools that converted from traditional high schools to SLCs (Darling-Hammond, Aness & Ort, 2002) while others have found moderately lower scores for students in newly built small schools (AIR, 2005). Overall, findings regarding academic achievement are mixed and inconclusive, and while some studies show increased academic performance, the cause cannot be determined to be the SLC structure.

California achievement data indicate that schools should not be too large or too small

Figures 1 through 3 present the 2007 Base Academic Performance Index scores for all California elementary, middle, and senior high schools by decile of enrollment size.¹ The data represent the range of API scores, with the median score and scores at the 25th and 75th percentile presented. Examination of these data indicates that school size could be a factor in school performance, but the relationship is not linear (i.e., API scores do not decrease consistently as school enrollment increases).

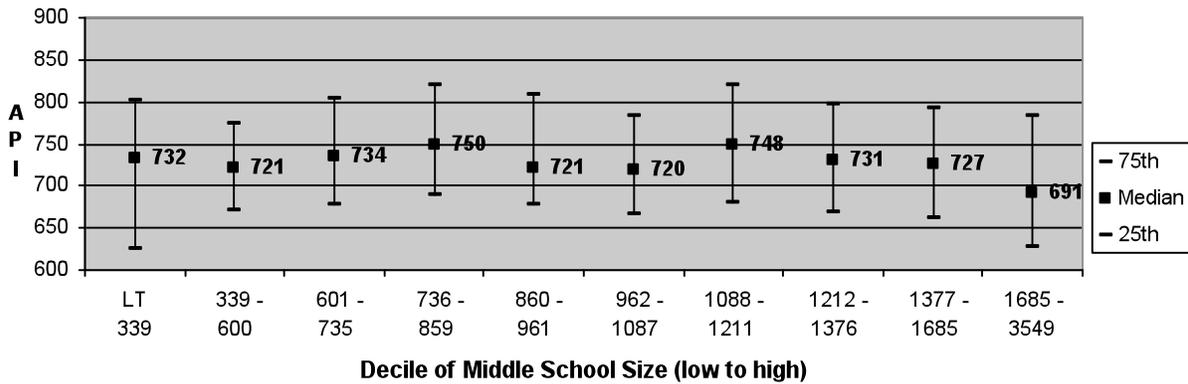
Figure 1
Comparison of School API Scores by Quartile and School Size:
All California Elementary Schools (N=4,773)



¹ A decile is created by dividing schools into 10 relatively equal groups based on enrollment size. Thus, an elementary school in the 10th decile indicates it is among the largest 10 percent elementary schools in California.

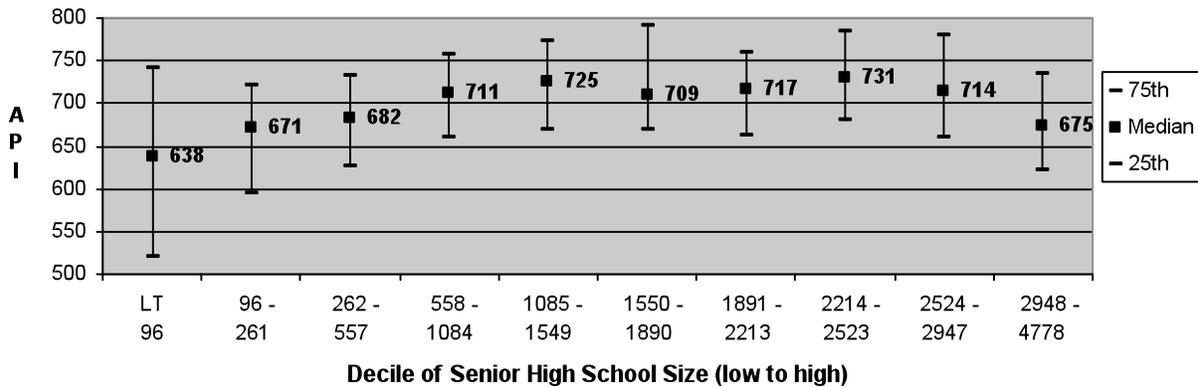
For elementary schools, the lowest median API scores were observed among the largest elementary schools (enrollment above 693 students). With the exception of schools at the fifth enrollment decile (465 to 510 students) where the median API score peaked, little difference was apparent between the first and eighth decile (less than 278 to 693 students) (see Figure 1).

Figure 2
Comparison of School API Scores by Quartile and School Size:
All California Middle Schools (N=1,198)



For middle schools, an overall pattern between API performance and school size is not evident except in the very largest middle schools (1,685 to 3,549 students). In fact, middle schools in the fourth (736 to 859 students) and the seventh enrollment deciles (1,088 to 1,211 students) exhibited the highest median API scores of all California schools (see Figure 2).

Figure 3
Comparison of School API Scores by Quartile and School Size:
All California Senior High Schools (N=1,100)



For senior high schools, one can see a trend that suggests that both very small and very large schools have lower API scores. Little difference was evident among schools sized between 558 and 2,947 students (see Figure 3).

These data confirm that the very largest schools do exhibit lower performance than schools of lower sizes. On the other hand, the data do not support a decision to make schools dramatically smaller, especially at the secondary level.

Strong leadership and effective planning are required to establish successful smaller schools and communities

Strong visionary leadership and buy-in from teachers is essential to successful conversion of large schools to SLCs (Colorado Children's Campaign, 2005). Rushed implementation brought on by a district mandate can cause resistance and stifle the reform process. Distributed leadership is critical to converting a large school to meaningful and effective SLCs (Steinberg, Allen, and Almeida, 2001). School principals must be strong leaders, yet willing to relinquish some control. SLCs need some level of autonomy to make curricular and programmatic changes and decisions for their students (Darling-Hammond, Aness & Ort, 2002).

When implemented under the right conditions and with necessary supports, smaller schools and SLCs are likely to immediately lead to more personalized learning environments, safer schools, and higher attendance. With strong and distributed leadership and awareness to equity and serving student needs, such environments can lead to increased instructional quality and improved academic achievement for more students.

REFERENCES

- American Institutes for Research and SRI International. (2005). *Creating cultures for learning: Supportive relationships in new and redesigned high schools*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Retrieved on 5/19/06 from http://www.air.org/publications/pubs_ehd_school_reform.aspx
- Colorado Children's Campaign (2005). Breaking up is hard to do: Lessons learned from the experiences of Manual High School. Retrieved on 01/05/07 from http://www.coloradokids.org/our_issues/k12_education/projects.html
- Cotton, K. (2001). *New small learning communities: Findings from recent literature*. Portland, OR. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Aness, J. & Ort, S. (2002). Reinventing high school: Outcomes of the Coalition Campus Schools Project. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39(3), 639-673.
- Fine, M. & Somerville, J.I. (Eds.). (1998). *Small schools, big imaginations: A creative look at urban public schools*. Chicago, IL: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform.
- Lambert, M.B., & Lowry, L., (2004). *Knowing and being known: Personalization as a foundation for student learning*. Seattle, WA: Small Schools Project.
- Steinberg, A., Allen, L., & Almeida, C. (2001). *Wall to wall: Implementing small learning communities in five Boston high schools*. Providence, RI: Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Lab.
- Wallach, C. A, & Lear, R. (2003). *An early report on comprehensive high school conversions*. Seattle, WA: Small Schools Project.
- Wallach, C. A., & Lear, R. (2005). *A foot in two worlds: The second report on comprehensive high school conversions*. Seattle, WA: Small Schools Project.
- Wasley, P. A., Fine, M., King, S. P., Powell, L. C., Holland, N. E., Gladden, R. M., & Mosak, E. (2000). *Small schools: Great strides. A study of new small schools in Chicago*. New York, NY: The Bank Street College of Education.