

## **Smaller Schools Offer Wealth of Benefits**

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We live in a world where the bigger something is, the better we think it is. The local news has been lauding the opening of a new high school in Tuscaloosa that has seven tennis courts. Is it a fitness center or a school? What is our emphasis in education? I certainly believe that today's children should be fit, but when did we begin to think that the bigger a school is, the better it is?

According to a study reported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the value of small schools can be found in improved attendance, improved teacher effectiveness and reduced violence. Yet, here in Alabama, we tout mega schools. Some of our high schools are larger than some of our colleges and universities. In their formative years, we are reducing our children to numbers. If a teacher doesn't know a student's name, how can that student possibly be treated as an individual? Too many of our children are falling by the wayside because they are paralyzed by big schools and are unable to be successful because either no one notices their needs or can accommodate their learning differences.

As this school year begins, let us take the time to consider the value of smaller schools.

Schools are the first social system that our children encounter, and they provide the groundwork for the way our children will respond in social situations for the rest of their lives well into adulthood. If the school is "super-sized," the child may experience a loss of identity and may feel isolated or alienated from others. In a smaller school, students and teachers can experience a sense of bonding with one another. Parents can interact more easily with teachers and administrators. Finally, students and teachers will develop more positive, lasting relationships in a more familial setting.

In 1999, I was given the opportunity to effect a change in the way education was perceived in Birmingham. At that time, after 25 years of teaching in the private sector and in dangerous and difficult settings, I wanted to speak for those children who cried because they studied and studied and still failed the test; or had a teacher tell them not to ask stupid questions; or who worried every morning before school because they were afraid or anxious; and who, defeated time and time again, finally gave up and withdrew from their family and friends. I wanted to start a school for those students who wanted to learn but had been told repeatedly that they couldn't. I wanted to start a school where students would want to attend every day because they were looking forward to learning. I wanted to start a school where students felt safe to be themselves and were valued for who they were.

So I did. By even small school standards, it's small. I have physical space for 30 students, and we teach students in grades 6-12. It is a return to the concept of the one-room schoolhouse. We follow state Department of Education guidelines and offer courses ranging from basic to college preparatory to advanced placement with a variety of electives every year. Students are challenged on an individual basis to achieve to the best of their abilities. They are held accountable for their actions and choices, while our teachers are challenged to teach to the individual needs and abilities of their students. Tolerance and respect for others are expected. Our classroom can be larger than its physical layout as we have observed the Blanton and Cherry trials first-hand, heard Archbishop Desmond Tutu, worked for Habitat for Humanity, visited the D-Day Museum in New Orleans and enjoyed plays at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery.

It is true that a school this small is not for everyone. It is also true that there is no "perfect" school. But certainly, most of us can agree that smaller is better. Each of our children is a unique person with the potential to grow and become a contributing member of society. That potential in each child can be identified and realized only if our schools are small enough to nurture it. It's a new way of thinking, isn't it? That smaller is better. It takes courage. Let us as parents, educators and administrators make a commitment to our children, our future, as we enter a new school year in a very troubled world to consider the concept of smaller teaching environments where we can really see our students as individuals, treat them as individuals and teach them as individuals.