

April 1, 2003

Size Matters

By Joe Agron
American School & University

Does size matter? When it comes to security and the size of school facilities, recent research suggests that it may.

According to a University of Minnesota survey, the size of a middle or high school has a significant impact on young people's lives. The survey found that large campuses, particularly those with more than 1,200 students, foster alienation, drug use and risky behavior. Students also tend to feel less attached to these schools and less comfortable around fellow students and staff.

School class size has been a major focus of federal, state and local lawmakers; the overall size of a school has not received nearly as much attention. However, with some of the most spectacular incidents of violence taking place at large schools (Columbine had approximately 1,900 students at the time of the 1999 shootings), the question begs: "Do large schools breed violence?"

The majority of the nation's school children attend classes in schools that are considered large. Approximately 70 percent of high-school-age children attend schools with more than 1,000 students; nearly 50 percent attend schools with more than 1,500. The U.S. Department of Education states that 400 to 800 is the ideal enrollment.

There are a number of reasons why institutions build large facilities, and most revolve around efficiencies, budget and available land. But the benefits of smaller, more intimate school environments have been noticed — and strategies attempting to make large schools feel smaller are evident in many school designs through concepts such as schools-within-schools, houses, teaming and smaller learning communities.

There are many indicators — both perceived and real — that can be attributed to violence in school. Poverty, drugs, gangs and broken homes are all seen as potential warning signs. Schools have responded by establishing programs on violence prevention, anger management and crisis prevention, and installing state-of-the-art security systems. But the overall size of the school often is not given consideration in relation to its impact on security.

The trend toward larger schools will most likely continue as administrators struggle to keep up with rapidly rising enrollments, lean budgets and lack of available land to build. But consideration must be given to how secure these larger buildings are, and the environment that results from the sizeable population that will be within.

The challenge for planners will be to continue creating more innovative ways to give larger schools a more intimate, and safe, feel — melding large-school efficiencies with a small-school environment.

SCORECARD**70,174**

Average size (square feet) of new elementary schools completed in 2002, up from 62,800 square feet in 1997.

515

Average enrollment in new elementary schools completed in 2002, down from 600 in 1997.

109,152

Average size (square feet) of new middle schools completed in 2002, up from 100,000 square feet in 1997.

650

Average enrollment in new middle schools completed in 2002, down from 725 in 1997.

125,304

Average size (square feet) of new high schools completed in 2002, up from 120,500 square feet in 1997.

979

Average enrollment in new high schools completed in 2002, up from 750 in 1997.

Source: *American School & University's 29th annual Official Education Construction Report.*

© American School & University