But the politicians will score points with the public—and with the unions. We understand why Bill Clinton needs such points nowadays. But his proposal is really a dog of an idea. Congress should shop at a different pet store.

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

William R. Capps and Mary Ellen Maxwell

This selection first appeared in *The American School Board Journal*'s September 1999 issue. William R. Capps is an education professor at Troy State University in Dothan, Alabama. Mary Ellen Maxwell, a school board member in Moyock, North Carolina, is immediate past president of the National School Boards Association.

For months, the nation has attempted with little success to decipher the cultural forces that led to the tragic high school shooting in Littleton, Colo. The political, media, and psychological pundits notwithstanding, about the only self-evident truth that can be gleaned from our soul-searching is that we have elevated finger-pointing to a fine and expedient art.

There is one convincing body of research, however, that invites the attention of school board members and administrators as they ponder how best to respond to the repercussions of Littleton. That research addresses the issue of school size.

The American character has been shaped in many ways by the concept of bigness—the bigger, the better. We glorify wide-open spaces, the Big Sky, the Big Gulp, and the Super-Sized. We are fascinated with the big and powerful. But sadly, we have lost our attachment to the beauty of smallness—a loss that has had a profound effect on our nation's schools.

The move toward ever-larger schools has been going on through most of the 20th century. This trend was validated in the late 1950s when Harvard University President James B. Conant and other nationally recognized education leaders began to advocate the creation of consolidated, comprehensive high schools. The best feature of such schools, they believed, was that they could offer students a wider variety of academic

and vocational courses. Underlying this rationale were the principles of efficiency and economy of scale espoused by business and industry.

In retrospect, there is a troubling irony: Conant believed an enrollment of just 400 students was sufficient for the delivery of a comprehensive high school curriculum. He did not foresee that his advocacy of the comprehensive high school would be used to justify creating enormous schools. Today, 25 percent of U.S. secondary schools enroll more than 1,000 students. Columbine High School, the site of the Littleton massacre, has nearly 2,000 students. The largest high school in the country—John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx—has 5,300.

The Merits of Smallness

The trend toward bigness and consolidation continues unabated. It is driven by political, economic, social, and demographic considerations, rather than by the extensive research indicating that school size has a demonstrable effect on how well we educate students. School officials who are contemplating consolidation, new school construction, or the prevention of school violence would do well to consider what this research says about the merits of small schools.

Kathleen Cotton, a research specialist at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Ore., conducted an exhaustive review of the available data on school size and concluded that "research has repeatedly found small schools to be superior to large schools on most measures and equal to them on the rest." (Cotton's 1996 report, *School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance*, can be found online at http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/10/c020.html.) For example, the teachers in small schools know the students well, so they are more likely to notice if a child is having academic or emotional problems. In addition, small schools, on average, have fewer discipline problems, better student attendance rates, and fewer dropouts than large schools. (These attributes should be especially appealing to school officials in states that have instituted accountability standards that measure school success on the basis of these criteria.)

Cotton notes that these findings are consistent across all grade levels (K–12), regardless of the students' abilities and the type of community—rural, suburban, or urban.

Deciding what constitutes a "small" school is still a matter of discussion, however. Although there is no official definition, many researchers

say that the appropriate size for an elementary school is from 300 to 400 students and that the enrollment of a secondary school should not exceed 800. In our experience, we have found these are good parameters.

School size is also a factor in adolescent alienation, which has been the subject of much of the public dialogue on school violence. The research shows that students who attend small schools have a greater sense of belonging than those who attend large schools. In fact, minimizing the alienation that commonly afflicts adolescents appears to be one of the most redeeming qualities of small schools. Large and impersonal high schools can obviously cloak the more severe manifestations of student alienation to a much greater degree than small schools.

In a May 2, 1999, opinion piece for the *Washington Post*, Lakis Polycarpou, a 1990 graduate of Columbine High School, eloquently portrayed the realities of suburban alienation—the increasing mobility of American culture, the "absolute interchangeability of place," and the difficulty of feeling part of a community. "We never knew our neighbors except in passing," he wrote; "we certainly never had a social connection to them."

Small schools can overcome these realities because they are more likely to foster a greater sense of community among students. The evidence shows that students in smaller schools are more likely to bond with their teachers and peers, and that they more readily identify with their schools. Parent involvement is also higher in small schools.

All these factors work together to help make small schools places that have positive and unique cultures. In their 1999 book *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership*, Terrence Deal, a professor of education at Vanderbilt University, and Kent Peterson, an education professor at the University of Wisconsin, define school culture as "deep patterns of values, beliefs and traditions which have been formed over the course of time." Recognition of the cultural framework within a school gives students a "system of meaning," they write. Small schools are more apt to have strong cultures, with the result that students see teachers enjoying their jobs, teacher absenteeism is rarely a problem, and students are more motivated to learn.

Academics, Activities, and Discipline

Despite such findings, the prevailing wisdom in some education circles holds that students attending small schools are academically penalized when it comes to achievement comparisons with their peers in large

schools. Cotton's review of the research shows that this is not the case: The academic achievement of students attending small schools is comparable to or better than that of students in large schools. These findings are not limited to standardized test data, Cotton says; they also apply to "school grades, test scores, honor roll membership, subject area achievement, and assessment of higher-order thinking skills." And, what is especially gratifying, these results hold true for minority students and students from poor families.

In addition, Cotton reports, students enrolled in small schools have higher levels of participation in extracurricular activities, and they are active in a greater number of these activities than are their peers in large schools. Again, this participation was found among all students regardless of race, ethnicity, or family income.

School size, not surprisingly, also has a definite effect on social interaction. Media reports from Columbine indicate there was tension between student athletes, the "Trenchcoat Mafia," and perhaps other student cliques. Cliques are a part of the social scene in any high school, of course, but the animosity they create is much greater in large schools, where many students do not know each other personally. In fact, the research documents the polarization of student groups in large schools. Small schools, in contrast, are less likely to experience the same sense of fragmentation and peer alienation.

It makes sense, then, that small schools experience fewer discipline problems than large schools. Put simply, antisocial behavior is less prevalent at small schools because there is a greater sense of knowing who's who and what they're up to. The interpersonal relationships found among students, teachers, and other staff members in small schools are stronger than those found in larger schools. Beyond that, there is a more caring atmosphere and a familiarity among students and teachers that fosters a desire to do the right thing—something not found in the anonymity of most large, comprehensive high schools.

Advocates of consolidation argue that large schools are cheaper to operate than small schools. The research Cotton reviewed, however, does not substantiate this claim. It appears that cost-efficiency is more a function of school management than school size. "Researchers have found that the relationship between size and cost varies depending on individual school circumstances," Cotton writes. "Many small schools are operated very economically, while many large ones have exorbitant per-pupil costs."

Certain costs, in fact, tend to be higher in bigger schools, especially those that have been consolidated. For example, the number of administrators tends to grow as schools are consolidated and enrollments increase. In addition, the costs associated with student transportation are higher due to the increased number of miles buses must travel daily. And administrators in consolidated schools often find it necessary to increase teacher-student ratios to save money.

Some researchers argue that the human costs of consolidation should also be factored into the equation. It is not uncommon, for instance, for students in geographically large districts to spend one to two hours every morning and afternoon on a bus, increasing the likelihood of safety and discipline problems on the bus.

Clearly, the move toward larger schools during the last century has exacted many intangible, social, and educational costs. We need to reclaim the small school's sense of community, caring, and meaning. Our children need to know school as a place where they feel a personal connection, a place where someone knows their dreams and fears, a place where they are safe—and, we would hope, a place where everybody knows their names.