

The Effects of School Size on Parental Involvement and Social Capital: Evidence from the ELS:2002

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An increasingly prominent approach to school reform emphasizes the possible benefits of creating smaller schools. Proponents argue that small schools are more effective than large schools at promoting student achievement, in large part because they have positive effects on the engagement and social interactions of students and staff. The analysis presented here explores another potentially distinct effect of small schools: the enhanced involvement of students' parents in the school and the promotion of social capital in the larger community. We present new empirical evidence on whether the size of public high schools influences measures of parental involvement and social capital. This analysis is based on nationally representative data from the base year of the recent Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002). In addition to conducting standard multivariate analyses, we attempt to establish bounds on the causal effects of school size by using the differences in observed traits across parents connected to smaller and larger schools as a guide to the size and direction of their potentially confounding unobserved traits.

The results presented here provide tentative evidence that small schools are more effective in promoting parental involvement in schools as well as engagement in the broader community. We find that in rural communities smaller high schools not only increase the probability that parents take part in parent-teacher association activities and volunteer at the school but also promote some measures of social capital (for example, knowledge of other parents and community identification). However, we find no such evidence in suburban communities. Unfortunately, there are so few small schools in the urban communities in our data that we cannot say much about the influence of school size in these contexts. Taken as a whole, our results suggest that there may be some beneficial effects of small schools on the outcomes we consider, but there may also be cultural or economic features unique to rural communities that limit the external validity of these results for other areas.