

National Association for Small Schools

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10th. December 2008

MERGERS DOOMED TO FAIL

Research by the Hay Group, using both corporate and public service examples, concludes that the push to save money by forced mergers invariably results in poorer performance. In the case of schools, even if the original schools were struggling the long-term results of 55% of the new super-schools were worse. At secondary level the figure was 68% and at primary 50%. The study's author observed that between 50 and 70 per cent of corporate mergers either failed outright or fell short of their stated objectives and noted how similar were the school findings. Schools do underpin local prosperity and cohesion, if not in the same way as businesses.

Better results came from a quarter of the schools invariably reflecting leadership vision and a different sense of purpose in view of the blending of different cultures, ambitions and communities. Handled in such a way the author said they could prove a useful strategy for raising standards but how difficult is it in large and very large schools to create and exploit those conditions?

Meanwhile NASS notes the overall failure rate to date and the tendency for the more negative factors to dominate practice. It remains almost a non-truth to argue small school children will be better off in larger schools.

Academy Effect just a Myth:

The academy concept at secondary school is in effect the same organisational rationale based on larger schools amalgamating smaller ones or replacing them in the name of standards and the appeal of modern buildings. Four major studies have shown that once a minimum standard is provided of air, sound-proofing and working space the quality of buildings has little impact on pupil performance.

In January 2009 a study of 24 of England's first academies, carried out over five years, casts doubt over the practices and value of the independent state-funded secondary schools. It is, like one of the major studies on Buildings effects, done by the respect company Price/Waterhouse/Coopers (*see below*).

NASS currently notes the Isle of Wight Council in the name of standards proposing to resolve its failing secondary school performance by building even larger ones while closing or enlarging the small primary schools that see it in the top 10% of national primary performance.

We see an administrative steam-roller laden with plausible but meaningless bureaucratic convenience erasing the well-documented excellence of performance, primary and secondary, in small schools. Popularity with parents reflects this even to the extent of unseating councils and councillors keen to close small schools. Parents know and understand the quality being achieved and recognise that it goes beyond academic performance alone.

Education is about people. For young children that is their parents and teachers and the closer that school is to home, and the smaller the scale, the more children can see these two important sets of people taking them in the same direction, on the same wavelength. This is the essential driving force of the long-term financial effects we argue return a profit on their costs.

NASS asserts that by closing smaller schools in the name of greater conformity in ever larger structures is a reduction of the diversity and choice it is a statutory duty for a Local Authority to provide, as well as failure to create a system shaped by parents, which is a further statutory duty.

Buildings for the Future/Fit for Purpose

Two substantial studies, one involving 900 schools by Price/Waterhouse/Coopers for the DCSF in 2003 and the second undertaken by the University of Newcastle for the Design Council in 2005, whilst noting the potential benefits of modern buildings and facilities was more prepared than ESTYN in its 2007 report cited by the RD Committee to consider and respect the force of a number of other factors contributing to pupil achievement, such as teaching quality, leadership and parental support. It emerged that provided a minimum standard were present, for example in terms of space, ventilation etc., there was no clear evidence that what one study called moving "*from a Ford to a Ferrari*" had any impact on pupil performance.

The seminal 1980 report "*15 000 Hours*" reported buildings and teaching conditions having little effect on performance. At the end of 2009 the Hattie Report was exposed in "*The Times Educational Supplement*." Professor Hattie has analysed over 12 years some 815 studies of what makes education effective. He has subsequently drawn up a catalogue of such factors and their relative effects, positive to negative. The study covered some 90m children in all.

The most positive factors are few, and by far the human relationship ones, quality of interaction, challenging work from teachers who know their pupils well. Almost every school and classroom organisation variable rated very low on the Hattie scale including buildings. We believe these studies vindicate our evidence to the effect that teachers and parents are the major benefit for young schoolchildren and the wiser target for investment. We observe that in a world of super computers and nanotechnology fast approaching it is currently foolish to try to determine exactly how education will be provided within the timescales Welsh and English Governments envisage for "*Buildings for the Future*" and "*fit for purpose*" investments. It will be wiser to invest in people. No discussion of such matters is offered to enhance the consideration of the public when shaping their response to consultation.