

National Association for Small Schools

Secretary: Barbara Taylor

'Quarrenden,' Upper Red Cross Road, Goring RG8 9BD Tel: 01491 873548

Chairman: Bill Goodhand Tel: 01400 272623 Information Officer: Mervyn Benford Tel: 01295 780225

The Good Behaviour Experience

July 2008

Throughout our lives the quality of a pupil's behaviour regularly featured in school reports sent home. OFSTED from the start required reports on pupil behaviour. It has always seemed nevertheless a separate pupil attribute, a separate, if desirable outcome of good schooling. Now OFSTED formally identify the connection there has always been between behaviour and learning outcomes. If good behaviour has rarely been linked to good academic results, bad behaviour is now identified as impacting significantly, and negatively, on work outcomes. Moreover there are growing fears about the behaviour of young people generally within society.

By extrapolation good behaviour secures good work outcomes. Nowhere has this been more evident than in OFSTED's report on the life and work of small schools. Report after report emphasises the high standard of behaviour found in such schools, the virtual absence of bullying, the positive attitudes to learning and to each other and the happy family atmosphere where teachers, pupils, parents and local community members know each other so well and so much together. The comparative study from the first full primary inspection cycle highlighted the strength of the ethos of most small schools.

You would think the life and work of small schools the perfect model for schools elsewhere, not least those apparently with that crucial handful, or more, of disruptive pupils now seen to do so much harm all round. The Government and some enterprising local authorities certainly value the model and have worked to keep small schools open against the decades-old threat of closure.

However, elsewhere in the country, perversely under the twin assault of another arm of Government based on cutting surplus places combined with its ostensibly fair but potentially far from partial new system for determining school closures, these models of excellence are being closed. Particular damage is being risked in Wales and Scotland where severe interpretation of ambivalent local policy threatens the fabric of rural society.

The argument is cost, expenditure seen far too narrowly. The Audit Commission stated the bulk of surplus capacity was urban. And does not delinquent behaviour anyway bring cost? And do not such costs endure well beyond school years? What other less visible social costs are there of schooling in which children may not have felt secure, and without positive attitudes to each other, and little affection for learning? It must not be forgotten that small schools deliver not only good behaviour and attitudes but also very good academic results.

They represent but 11% of the total yet their results, missing from annual league tables, are invariably above the rest, while OFSTED rates quality of teaching and leadership at the top of their scales. Despite the good findings of their first survey OFSTED now reports the smallest schools, those most maligned in LEA closure proposals, making the most rapid improvement of any sector. To close a small school represents a severe reduction in the quality everyone in Parliament claims to care so much about!

It is argued, as foolishly, that socio-economic advantage and small classes drive small school success. Tell that to families in Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Cumbria, Northumbria, Cornwall, and elsewhere. There is a lot of deprivation in rural Britain, different but distinctive, with incomes well below those shires close to London. Even after socio-economic discounting small schools are still at the top of performance tables, for academic and personal development. Moreover neither OFSTED nor NFER have been able to find evidence that making classes smaller drives up quality of outcomes.

Small schools have humanity of scale. Pupils identify with the job, feel effort worthwhile and achievement possible. These translate into the good behaviour that OFSTED now identifies as driving good results. A small rural secondary school in Herefordshire achieved a fine OFSTED report in which they won particular commendation for science lessons worked in classes of 60. Their most recent report says they are outstanding in everything they do.

We need humanity of scale in our schools. Where is the humanity in an infant or first school playground with 200 little bodies milling around totally anonymously? The deputy of a large primary school frequently observed how children from classes of 40 rarely played with more than a handful of other children except in things like football.

Heads of village schools readily observe the social quality of both work and play where five-year-olds joined eleven-year-olds. The unavoidable mixed ability of small schools, managed well, is a rare strength. For learning was always and remains first social, It begins in small mixed age groups called families, to which the children return every day. We have to get the social things right before we can hope to have effect on the brain.

The small school, close to home and community, well integrates learning with everyday life, an absolute curriculum imperative until serious later specialisation. Little wonder that teenage fans of London football clubs taking volunteer lessons in maths and English improved up to 100% on their school performance. They identified with the subject of the work. They did their better work outside an institution often quite alien to the way learning best happens.

We close small schools at our peril, but tell that to the professional officers who feed their decision-makers, an increasingly smaller tranche of the full elected councils, dubious, unproven assumptions about minimum desirable size of primary school being 80 or 90 and in two recent instances, 210. Moreover, if the social strength of small schools was developed into even richer local community partnership they would become extremely good value for money. Unit costs is a flawed financial tool for valid economic analysis.

Meanwhile we can be comforted that US experience of financial intervention to create more desirable social conditions in schools has already been thoroughly well-documented such that for every dollar spent early more than fifteen now return to the Exchequer. Of course larger schools enjoy good behaviour but the same factors will obtain. The answer to the behaviour problem is clear and already with us. Keep small schools and create humanity of scale in the rest.