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Study concludes Florida's schools largest in nation

Public schools in Florida are the largest in the country, which some experts say creates a poor learning environment and instigates higher dropout rates.

BY MATTHEW I. PINZUR AND HANNAH SAMPSON
Miami Herald

The classrooms of Michael Krop Senior High are filled with thousands of senior Ryan Sprechman's classmates. Through four years at the Northeast Miami-Dade school, he has met only a handful of them.

"Every time I'm in the hall, I recognize maybe three people out of the hundred I see," he said.

His experience is typical across the state. A national study released Wednesday found that Florida has the largest schools in the country. Krop is 263,000 square feet, twice as large as the baseball field at Dolphins Stadium.

Many senior highs house more than 3,000 students -- a few have more than 4,000.

"Large schools tend to be anonymous places, places where teachers and students are little known to each other," said Thomas Toch, author of *High Schools on a Human Scale: How Small Schools Can Transform American Education*. ``The anonymity often breeds apathy or alienation; many kids fall through the cracks."

The annual Quality Counts study, compiled by Education Week magazine, largely confirmed the conventional wisdom about Florida's schools -- the state's accountability and testing program is among the nation's most stringent, and education dollars are shared fairly equitably between poor and rich areas, but per-pupil spending remains low and the high school graduation rate remains dismal.

BURIED ISSUE

But buried in the report's data was the news that Florida students, more than any others in the country, attend large schools.

A growing movement of local and national educators believe such huge schools have more absenteeism, lower graduation rates and more frequent vandalism. In smaller schools, faculty are more likely to know students by name and intervene when they miss class or flunk a test.

"Many kids come to school already disconnected, apathetic or alienated, and the only way you can overcome that is to give these kids a sense of being connected, a sense of being cared about," Toch said. ``It sounds a little touchy-feely, and it is, but it's important."

A state school-reform task force is planning to recommend smaller middle and senior highs, and at least one member of the Miami-Dade School Board has threatened to vote against construction of large new campuses.

"Is this what we want to be responsible for when we open these schools?" said board member Evelyn Greer, speaking at a committee meeting late last year.

The principal of one of Broward's smallest public schools said low enrollment enhances the sense of community and slows teacher turnover.

"We know every child in our school, at least someone does," said Lincoln Pasteur, principal at Collins Elementary in Dania Beach. `` The children that go to school here, many of their parents have gone to school here."

But Collins is only small by Florida standards; with 362 students, it does not meet the Education Week study's 350-student cutoff for a small school. Between Miami-Dade and Broward, only a handful of the nearly 400 elementaries qualify, and almost all those are charter schools.

Scarce land, skyrocketing construction costs and relatively meager school-construction funding have left South Florida districts with little alternative.

Florida Education Commissioner John Winn has proposed \$1.9 billion for school construction this year, but actual funding from the Legislature has historically been far lower.

According to the Education Week report, Florida committed just over \$190 million for school construction in fiscal 2006 -- about as much as Alaska, Hawaii and Kentucky, and dramatically less than California's \$6.2 billion, New York's \$1.5 billion or even Ohio's \$655 million.

"That's just a sad statement of Florida's investment in the infrastructure of public education," said Miami-Dade Superintendent Rudy Crew.

BOUTIQUE SCHOOL

Crew has proposed a handful of boutique middle and senior highs -- similar to the wildly successful 500-student Design and Architecture Senior High -- but said the district cannot abandon the huge buildings at schools such as Felix Varela and G. Holmes Braddock, a pair of Southwest Dade schools that hold a combined 8,500 students.

"The starting point for this is not size," Crew said. `` The real issue is relationships, the issue of what environment is most conducive and allows for a strong, engaged relationship between students and teachers.

To that end, both Miami-Dade and Broward are embracing one of education's vogue reforms: small learning environments.

A large school would hold numerous quasi-independent programs, each with its own students, teachers and staff. Some could even have their own wing of the building, only interacting with other programs for clubs, sports and shared facilities like the gym and cafeteria.

"If we had the resources, I think anybody would like to have smaller schools than we have," said Broward Superintendent Frank Till. `` But since we can't, the idea is to have a small-school atmosphere in our larger schools."

Coral Reef Senior High has used that model successfully for years, and many other senior highs are now phasing it in.

"I think the students are going to start feeling more of a belongingness," said Manuel Garcia, principal at Braddock, which has nearly 4,500 students.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

If his school were replaced with a half-dozen small boutiques, Garcia said it would rob the community of a unifying force; families from Sweetwater to Lakes of the Meadow have been Braddock Bulldogs.

There are more tangible advantages, as well. With such a student body to draw from, clubs and teams are stacked with talented teens. Even esoteric clubs, such as Braddock's Anatomy Club, can find enough members to stay active.

Moreover, the evidence linking school size to academics is young and untested. The movement is well-funded -- much of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's \$1 billion in education grants has gone into small-school experiments -- but even its advocates are hesitant to pronounce the case closed.

"There are signs of promise in this approach, but certainly the jury is still out," said Christopher Swanson, project director of the Education Week study.

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