When we observed the superficial aspects of a small town's operation, such as the trickle of automobile and pedestrian traffic in the streets, and compared this with the bustle of cars and people in city life, the small community appeared inactive, socially unimportant. However, our experience with inhabitants of the small community showed something else: these were busy people! Furthermore, the small town's inactive street appearance did not match the discovery that many economic and cultural settings were ongoing. What made the inhabitants busy were the demands put upon them by the town's many settings. Each of the settings manifested "slots," or positions, that had to be filled if such affairs as grocery stores, worship services, high-school basketball games, Rotary meetings, and the library facilities were to survive. The town's inhabitants—and these included children, adolescents, adults, and old people—had to "man" the setting positions. The small towns in our experience maintained many settings with few people; the towns were persistently undermanned. The undermanning pressures yielded significant behavioral effects: a wide range of people were given important things to do, and people had to work hard at varied and responsible tasks to keep the settings operative. The chance to act significantly and to feel significant were enhanced in the small community. Such was the experience that led us to the conceptual structure for Big School, Small School.

The more applied impetus for this research related to the developmental perspective that was urging high-school reform in the late 1950s. Authorities were confidently maintaining that small schools (less than 300 enroll ...) could not ... ride the necessary resources for adequate secondary education. This fit the more general feeling of the times that "bigger is better." Consolidation of thousands of American small schools would be required if education were to improve.

It seemed to us that undermanning probably existed in the smaller schools, and, if this were true, important educational values could be derived from small schools. Data were badly needed on what was actually happening to the youthful inhabitants of large and small schools. Our research team then examined the experiences of several hundred students in over a thousand school settings and discovered that small schools were, indeed, undermanned. Further, relative to their large-school counterparts, small-school students took more responsible and more varied positions in their schools' settings. Finally, small-school youth reported more active and socially significant feelings from their high-school experience; feelings of obligation to school affairs were much more common for the small-school students.

In the years that followed publication of our book, a number of empirical studies confirmed these early findings. Interest appeared in the arenas of social and educational policy-making. We and our associates have been asked to consult on school-size issues in committee hearings of state legislatures, at school board and PTA meetings, at educational workshops, and in several different courthouses. By now, the earlier consensus that "bigger is better" has faded, and some reformers are saying that significant change in schools will require smaller, not larger, units. But the pressures for consolidation persist, fueled partly by the decreasing populations in many school districts. The hope always is that combining schools will reduce taxes—this in spite of the fact that such tax reduction has almost never occurred.

The Big School, Small School research probably attracts readers not only because it documents some of the advantages of small school size but, more significantly, because it clearly identifies a major variable responsible for these advantages, the variable of undermanning.