

**Barker R G & Gump P V.** *Big school, small school: high school size and student behavior.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964. 250 p.  
[Midwest Psychological Field Station, University of Kansas, Oskaloosa, KS]

Investigated were the effects of variation of school size upon the activity and reactions of high-school students. The undermanning of settings, typical of small schools, produced more varied and responsible actions and reactions than the optimum or overmanning of large schools. [The SSCI® indicates that this book has been cited in over 275 publications since 1966.]

Paul V. Gump  
Department of Psychology  
University of Kansas  
Lawrence, KS 66045-2160

June 23, 1988

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 educational rhetoric that was urging high-school reform in the late 1950s. Authorities were confidently maintaining that small schools (less than 300 enrollment) could not provide 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 activity 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.<sup>1-3</sup> 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 courtrooms. 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.

1. Schoggen P. *Behavior settings: a revision of Barker's Ecological Psychology.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (In press.)
2. Wicker A W. Undermanning, performances, and students' subjective experiences in behavior settings of large and small high schools. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 10:255-61, 1968. (Cited 40 times.)
3. Willems E P. Sense of obligation to high school activities as related to school size and marginality of student. *Child Develop.* 38:1247-60, 1967. (Cited 30 times.)
4. Hechinger F M. About education. *New York Times* 22 June 1988. p. 24.
5. Sher J P, ed. *Education in rural America: a reassessment of conventional wisdom.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977. 392 p.