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# In Praise of Large Schools

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*Opportunity is the name of the game*

I write in praise of large independent schools; of schools whose enrollments stretch to 700 students and beyond. Although there are a handful of boarding schools whose enrollments touch this number, most members of this cohort are day schools, generally with several divisions. They are built upon the school-within-a-school model: two, three, or four divisions (junior, lower, middle, and upper schools), which are independent and yet informed by and share fully an institution-wide commitment to a set of values, virtues, and characteristics: the school mission.

In its most robust incarnation, the large school builds and assesses curriculum, hires and develops faculty, and plans and implements strategic initiatives across the widest possible range of student experience and expectation: clearly, what is good and just and right for fourth graders can and should enhance the daily life of high school seniors. In this way, the burden placed upon large schools—that of conceiving of and addressing the needs of students from the moment they enter school until they arrive on their respective college campuses—reveals to those schools possibilities wholly absent in schools which, by design or consequence, enjoy a much more limited set of opportunities.

And opportunity is, of course, the name of the game. I have yet to meet a father who wants fewer opportunities for his daughter; or a mother who hopes her son's experience will not prepare him well for the rough-and-tumble world looming beyond the pristine confines of our campus. This is the small-school dilemma: how to teach leadership in a school community which offers only one or two leadership positions; how to address the variety of learning styles and needs within the confines of a one-size-fits-all program; how to expand the notion of opportunity to include the greatest number of classes, clubs, teams, and ensembles. In large schools, availability of—and access to—program are expanded through design and necessity: large schools simply get to create more and varied programs for their students and ensure that every facility meets the needs of all students. These are the advantages of size, reach, and scope.

Let's begin with the academic program in one such

large school. As a great percentage of each graduating class will have joined the school community in the lower or middle school, the academic program is built to meet the needs of students both at grade level and across divisions. The daily schedule encourages faculty to teach in more than one division; and allows very able lower and middle school students to study math, science, and foreign language in an upper division. Experience teaches that a plurality of students in AB or BC calculus will have enrolled in the lower or middle school; thus, lower and middle school math curricula are designed to prepare students for those critical terminal points. The daily journal system, which is a central feature of the lower school writing program, is employed in every middle and upper school English classroom. The upper school architecture program, whose students are coveted by the finest university architecture programs in the country, is built upon the school's own middle school model. In every possible way, grade-and-division level programs are independent, able to stand squarely on their own; and yet, each is influenced by and benefits from the larger scope of PreK through 12 curriculum planning and implementation.

Let's move next to facilities. It is not enough that large schools are blessed with generous facilities, but rather that those facilities serve every part of the school community. A hockey rink, built originally to serve the needs of a vigorous high school hockey program, is filled each class day by younger students (as young as four years old) learning to skate. The 450-seat theater is as comfortable a home to upper and middle school the-

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ater productions as it is to the fourth grade operetta, one of the school's great traditions. (Imagine the confidence a fourth grader carries with her after she has delivered her lines to a packed house!) In the world-class fine arts complex, second graders paint, draw, and craft ceramic vases in the same studios in which high school seniors prepare their college portfolios. Often, younger and older students pursue these endeavors side by side.

Large schools offer an array of co-curricular and leadership programs unmatched and unimagined by their smaller counterparts, for they appreciate that opportunity without access is of little value. It is not unusual for a large school to boast of three, four, or five school newspapers and yearbooks, each with its own editorial staff and cohort of writers; to field a dizzying array of teams in every sport (seven middle and upper school interscholastic ice hockey teams will hit the ice this winter); to mount five or six plays and support eight or ten vocal and instrumental music ensembles; or to encourage an expansive student government that looks less like that of a small town than it does the United Nations.

And finally, a word about school culture. The independent school community attempts to capture the value-added dimension of its experience with a single adjective: nurturing. More often than not, that virtue is ascribed liberally to small schools but almost entirely absent in describing large schools. Still, it is tough to find an independent school that is not student-centered; and, given the size of our classes, it would be re-

markable if our schools—large or small—did not know our students much better than do our public school counterparts. Instead, in trying to distinguish among large and small schools, I'd urge us not to confuse nurturing with safe.

Let's agree that all children need to feel safe and that, within the confines of a safe community, children of every age will grow, explore, and test themselves. Safe communities come in every size and shape, as the qualities and characteristics listed above have less to do with the size of a school than they do the premium placed in a given school community on achieving each.

But school culture in these larger institutions is exciting and empowering in a different way, offering students more room to maneuver, to succeed and fail, to try on new identities and join new peer groups. Large schools are meritocracies in which talent and perseverance win out, as students learn, early on, a critical life lesson: showing up is never enough. Large schools tend to attract and cultivate confident, independent, undaunted thinkers, athletes, and artists, eager to navigate these complicated, complex institutions (which look and feel very much like the real world beyond their cozy confines); eager to advocate for themselves and take responsibility for their own success and disappointment. When our graduates bid us goodbye, they take with them the skills and talents they will need to flourish and prosper...for the rest of their lives.

