



The Hobbit Effect: Why Small Works in Public Schools

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There is a battle going on out there, and it's not pretty and certainly not rational. Across the country, states are pushing to close their small rural schools with the mistaken hope of saving money. This struggle is currently happening in almost all regions of the country and includes states as diverse as Arkansas, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Nebraska, South Carolina, and South Dakota ("Anything but research-based," 2006).

What is especially irrational about this trend is that these efforts persist in spite of overwhelming evidence that smaller schools are beneficial for kids. For example, research evidence documents that when socioeconomic factors are controlled, children in smaller schools:

- Are more academically successful than those in larger schools.
- Have higher graduation rates.
- Are more likely to take advanced level courses.
- Are more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities (Cotton, 1996).

In addition, small schools are frequently the glue that binds together small communities, serving as their economic and social hub. Small villages that lose their schools lose more than a building—they lose their collective cultural and civic center.

The battle is even more illogical when compared with the opposing trend in urban areas, where reform efforts concentrate on breaking down dysfunctionally large schools and forming new smaller learning communities. Urban educators, recognizing the proven advantages of small schools, are actively pursuing a "smaller is better" model. Some of these efforts are state-supported, while others are financed through private sources. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, has pumped millions into these urban reform strategies.

In short, it is clear that small works in schools—this report explores why.