

A Review of Research on Small-School Student Participation in Extracurricular Activities

Neil G. Stevens

Eureka County High School

Gary L. Peltier

University of Nevada

The question of small-school student participation in extracurricular activities has interested scholars in the small and rural education field for some time. In this article, we summarize the available research on participation in extracurricular activities, the outcomes of such participation, and factors that favor participation in these activities. Finally, we consider practical implications for educators in small schools.

Below, we summarize the research on small-school students and the extracurricular activities in these schools. We begin by examining the degree of extracurricular participation in small schools. Next, we review the outcomes of such participation. Third, the factors that promote participation are examined. Finally, we offer recommendations regarding extracurricular programs in small schools.

School Size and Extracurricular Participation

One of the earliest studies in this area was conducted by Larsen (1949). Students in large high schools reported to have had taken part in far fewer extracurricular activities than did students in small schools. Larsen also noted that, in contrast to students in small schools, students from large schools reported having difficulty getting into various activities.

Barker and Gump (1964) found that the small school provides students with a higher proportion of extracurricular activities than do large schools. Specifically, (a) small-school students participate in about the same number of activities commonly regarded as extracurricular as do large-school students, (b) small-school students participate in a wider variety of extracurricular activities than do students in large schools, (c) a much larger portion of small-school students hold positions of importance and responsibility, and (d) small-school students hold responsible and central positions in a wider variety of activities than do students in large schools.

Wicker (1968) differentiated extracurricular activities in large and small schools by the degree to which they are

“overmanned—more students exist than can be accommodated by the activity—or conversely, undermanned.” Generally, Wicker held that activities in large schools are overmanned, while those activities found in small schools are undermanned. Students in overmanned settings are less likely to be participants in an extracurricular activity when compared to students from undermanned schools. “And since overmanned settings are more characteristic of large schools than small schools, the former will have fewer performances [in extracurricular activities] by the average student” (Wicker, 1968, p. 260).

In another study, Wicker (1969) matched 40 juniors from four small high schools and one large high school. Confirming earlier findings, his results suggested that small school students enter a wider range of [activities] and have more responsible positions . . . than do students of large schools” (Wicker, 1969, p. 202).

Further information was provided by a national sample of more than 21,000 high school students, all of whom had participated in the American College Testing Program. In an assessment of the program, Baird (1969) asked each student to reflect on the nature of their secondary school extracurricular participation. Baird found that in schools with fewer than 25 students in the graduating class, only 12% of the graduates had *not* held any leadership positions. However, in schools of 400 or more in the graduating class, 27% had not held a position of leadership.

Kleinert (1969) selected 63 high schools, grades 10-12, with enrollments of 87 to 3,063 students. Student participation was studied in activities ranging from athletics to service committees. Among the results of the study, there was an inverse relationship between (a) the students' opportunity to participate in a number of activities and (b) the size of the high school.

In a follow-up study structured upon the findings of Barker and Gump (1964) and Wicker (1968), Morgan and

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Neil G. Stevens, Eureka County High School, Eureka, NV 89316.

Alwin (1980) studied a randomly selected sample of more than 9,000 Washington juniors and seniors from 55 small and large schools. Enrollment ranged from 17 to 1,205 juniors and seniors. These researchers concluded that "school size has consistently strong [and negative] effects on rates of participation in [extracurricular] activities" (p. 251).

Using a smaller sample, Grabe (1981) studied roughly 1,600 students in five large schools—more than 580 students in grades 10-12—and 15 small schools (all other schools). Similar to the results of previous studies, students in smaller schools reported participating in more voluntary activities than did students in large schools.

More recently, Scoggen (1984) examined almost 9,000 seniors in 24 suburban and rural high schools in New York whose senior class ranged from 21 to 622 students. As with the findings above, students in smaller high schools were found to participate in the extracurricular activities at a much higher rate than did the students from large high schools. "Especially noteworthy and robust are the much higher [percentages] of students in the larger schools relative to the smaller schools showing no participation whatever in any of the school's activities" (p. 15).

Rogers (1987) studied 34 randomly selected high schools (grades 9-12) in Illinois that ranged in size from fewer than 100 students to roughly 500 students. Again, the researchers found results strikingly similar to previous studies. "As the high school size increased, a smaller percentage of the student body participated in [extracurricular] activities" (p. 10). This study also found evidence that the smaller the high school, the higher the percentage of students who were participating in athletics.

Outcomes of Student Participation

Concern about extracurricular outcomes is not a recent one. Thirty years ago, in the now classic *Big school, small school*, Barker and Gump (1964) studied the degree of student satisfaction with extracurricular participation among junior boys from four small high schools (fewer than 130 students) and one large high school (more than 2,500 students). Although these researchers acknowledged the limitations of self-report data, they nonetheless found that small-school juniors reported feelings of increased competence resulting from both being challenged and from the acquisition of "uplifting" values. Barker and Gump attributed this to the observation that junior students in the small schools consistently held positions of greater responsibility for the activities in which they participated.

Wicker (1968), in the study described above, similarly found positive outcomes associated with extracurricular participation. Small-school juniors, relative to their large-school counterparts, reported that they received more satisfying experiences through "being needed, feeling chal-

lenged, having an important job, and developing self-confidence" (p. 255) from their extracurricular participation.

Several studies have looked at long-term results of participation in school activities. Spady (1970) conducted a longitudinal study of nearly 300 senior boys in order to determine the relationship between their participation in high school activities and their survival rate in college. Holding constant socioeconomic status (SES), intelligence, and academic achievement, Spady found that high-participation students, in fact, completed more years of postsecondary education than did low-participation students. Further, Spady also found that extracurricular participation accounted for more variability in educational attainment than did SES, intelligence or academic achievement.

Halsall (1973) reviewed research related to school size and concluded that smaller schools provide an environment favorable to the personal development of students:

The pressures which small schools are shown to exert . . . help to contribute to a sense of competence, since whether weak, strong, inept, skillful, young, or inexperienced, each pupil is really important. Many activities cannot continue without this participation, and the increased sense of responsibility which this situation generates is likely to produce greater and earlier maturity, as well as greater capacity for leadership. (Halsall, 1973, p. 95)

Otto (1975), attempting to replicate Spady's 1970 work, argued that extracurricular participation nurtures positive attitudes and skills that have payoffs later in life. In particular, extracurricular activities play a significant role in the educational attainment process. Drawing a rather sobering implication from his results, Otto made the following observation: "High school policies which deny participation in extracurricular activities to those who have not achieved a minimal grade point average may be penalizing those very students who can least afford it" (p. 172).

A similar study compared a randomly selected sample of 400 incoming Kansas State University freshmen from both large and small schools. Downey (1978) studied the relationship between the degree of high school extracurricular participation and academic success in college. One result of the study was that "students from smaller schools [tend] to be more involved in a variety of [college] activities" (p. 358).

Scoggen's (1984) study of over 9,000 students from small and large high schools in New York concluded that the small-school students' higher degree of extracurricular participation is strongly related to later cognitive, social, and personality development in adulthood. Examples of later-life developments are a higher survival rate in college and greater involvement in adult civic groups, church and

lodge groups, sports teams, and charity and welfare organizations.

Goodlad (1984), too, points to the benefits of extracurricular participation. To be sure, the effects of extracurricular participation were not the focus of Goodlad's work. Nonetheless, his data suggested that students "who reported participation in extracurricular activities had higher self-concept . . . than those who did not" (p. 225).

Schonert-Reichl, Elliot, and Bills (1991) studied the postsecondary persistence of rural Iowa youth five years after high school graduation. One of their conclusions was that involvement in extracurricular activity may cultivate perseverance, a sense of "stickwithness" (Downey, 1980), and self-esteem (Dunne, 1977).

Finally, from results of national surveys, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFSHSA, 1985) related that students who participate in high school activities are more likely to have a higher grade-point average and better attendance records. In fact, the NFSHSA reports that "of students who drop out of school, a full 94% are those who did not join in some form of school activities" (as reported in Rogers, 1987, p. 11). The NFSHSA study did not address the plausible argument that extracurricular participation could be the *effect* of better-performing and better-attending students, rather the *cause* of these student characteristics.

Taken collectively, the results of these studies suggest that a high degree of student participation in extracurricular activities is likely to provide the opportunity for enhanced leadership, responsibility, and perseverance.

Research seems to indicate that one of the outcomes of student participation in extracurricular activities is the positive socialization process that young adults generally need. Self-confidence, maturity, and self-esteem appear to develop in the extracurriculum. It is clear that the degree of such participation is higher and has a tendency to be richer in small schools. Assuming these findings are correct, let us now focus on the research determining the reasons *why* small-school students participate in extracurricular activities.

Factors that Promote Student Extracurricular Participation in Small Secondary Schools

Barker and Gump (1964) postulated two forces that tend to promote student extracurricular participation in undermanned settings. The first, the "attraction" force, was defined as an increase in student intrinsic responsibility to participate due to an increased opportunity for participation. The second, "foreign" forces, were those pressures applied on individual students by others through invitations, demands, and requirements to participate.

Individuals in [undermanned] settings who might otherwise attend only to watch or participate peripherally will be pressed into service (foreign force) in important functions more often; they will have a larger share of responsibility for the setting and will experience more feelings of responsibility and obligation (attraction force). (Barker & Gump, 1964, p. 133)

Willems (1967) further examined this question by studying 40 marginal students and 40 regular students in both small and large schools. From the self-report of students, Willems concluded that the smaller environment created a sense of obligation to matriculate to and participate in extracurricular activities among both student groups. Interestingly, marginal students in larger schools developed no sense of obligation to participate.

The aforementioned work of Wicker (1969) produced similar results. Specifically, he found that because of the undermanned nature of the small-school environment, the "participants sense the possibility of losing satisfactions the [activities] provide, and seek to maintain them by increased effort, and by inducing others to participate" (p. 202).

However, Downey (1978) concluded that the higher degree of extracurricular involvement in small schools was primarily the result of a greater opportunity to participate, and that small schools generate the feeling that every student is needed in the ecological system characteristic of small schools. Scoggen (1984) found "small schools, with their relatively underpopulated settings, encourage participation by many students; the students themselves can see that they are needed for the continued successful operation of the settings" (p. 16).

In a recent study, Stevens (1992) viewed student participation in 12 small schools in Nevada through interviews with the school principals. Principals reported that more than one factor is usually responsible for student participation. They also concluded that students do sense an opportunity due to fewer students, particularly in the athletic programs.

In contrast to Wicker (1969), these Nevada principals did not believe that students participate out of the fear of losing an activity. Students had not been seen recruiting others into activities; however, peer and parental pressure to participate was acknowledged. The principals also felt that students do benefit from participation and that more students should participate in school activities.

The overall importance of extracurricular involvement is eloquently stated by a former small-school graduate:

I guess I feel saddened by the fact that a lot of small schools are being closed. I really feel fortunate to have gone to a small school. I was able to participate in a wide variety of activities in which I learned so

much that books couldn't teach. I hope there are small schools around when my children reach high school so they can participate and enjoy whatever they choose to be in. (Schonert-Reichl, Elliot, & Bills, 1993, p. 26)

Discussion

Our review of the literature supports several conclusions. First, students in small schools sense and react to an increased opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities because of the fewer students in these schools. Second, the small-school environment creates a sense of student obligation to participate. Third, the small-school environment creates the feeling among the students that all students are needed for the extracurricular activities to succeed. Fourth, the benefits of participation in extracurricular activities are positive and long lasting.

Educators should become more aware of the important role that participation in extracurricular activities plays in the education of the students. This was the first recommendation made by Schonert-Reichl et al. (1993) in their 10-year follow-up study of rural Iowa youth. Many of the students in the study focused on the opportunity for involvement in extracurricular activities as one of the main benefits of a rural school education.

Building administrators also would do well to monitor the numbers of students participating in various activities to see which activities are prompting the most interest and participation. Such information could prove beneficial to district and building administrators if the goal is to establish more options for those interested in participation.

The socialization benefit of extracurricular participation may need to be more fully realized by those who create and implement local policy. The outcome of an extracurricular policy whose design is inherently restrictive (e.g., cheerleading) could be denying admission to those students for whom participation may yield the greatest benefit.

In addition, the benefit of extracurricular socialization could be applied to academic instruction by creating or increasing the number of activities whose design would be scholastic in nature, as opposed to the present domination of athletics in most small schools. The Academic Olympics is one such possibility. A further possibility is to explore opportunities to extend graduation credit for participation in such activities.

District and state policy makers who are contemplating still further consolidation of schools should give equitable consideration to the merits of higher rates of student participation in the extracurriculum. The development of student social and interpersonal skills may well prove to be as important as the cognitive development of students. During a time when a growing number of people are becoming increasingly concerned about rising drug use, gang and

criminal activities and the general decay of our social fabric, the benefits of the extracurricular activities could be one antidote to this situation. The favorable impact of the extracurriculum may be one of the best reasons for the continuation of the nation's small schools.

References

- Baird, L. L. (1969). *Patterns of educational aspiration*. Iowa City, IA: American College Testing Program, Research and Development Division. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 035 403)
- Barker, R.G., & Gump, P. V. (1964). *Big school, small school*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Downey, R. G. (1978). Differences between entering freshmen from different size high schools. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 19*, 353-358.
- Downey, R. G. (1980). *Higher education and rural youth*. Paper presented at the Second Annual Kansas State University Rural and Small School Conference, Manhattan, Kansas. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 201 459)
- Dunne, F. (1977). Choosing smallness: An examination of the small school experience in rural America. In J. Sher (Ed.), *Education in rural America: A reassessment of conventional wisdom* (pp. 81-124). Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Goodlad, J. I. (1984). *A place called school*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Grabe, M. (1981). School size and the importance of school activities. *Adolescence, 16*, 21-31.
- Halsall, E. (1973). *The comprehensive school*. Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press.
- Kleinert, E. J. (1969). Effects of high school size on student activity participation. *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin, 53*, 34-46.
- Larsen, C. M. (1949). School size as a factor in the adjustment of high school seniors. *Bulletin No. 511, Youth Series No. 6*. Pullman, WA: State College of Washington.
- Morgan, D. L., & Alwin, D. F. (1980). When less is more: School size and student social participation. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 43*(2), 241-252.
- National Federation of State High School Associations. (1985). *The case for high school activities*.
- Otto, L. B. (1975). Extracurricular activities in the educational attainment process. *Rural Sociology, 40*(2), 162-176.
- Rogers, R. G. (1987). *Is big better? Fact or fad concerning school district organization*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of School Administrators, New Orleans. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 281 271).

- Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Elliot, J. P., & Bills, D. B. (1991). Rural Iowa youth: A descriptive summary of postsecondary persistence five years after high school. *Research in Higher Education, 23*(3), 269-286.
- Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Elliot, J. P., & Bills, D. B. (1993). *The effects of rural schools and communities on adult adjustment: A ten year follow-up of rural Iowa youth*. Final report to the Fine Foundation.
- Scoggen, P. (1984). *Student voluntary participation and high school size*. Paper presented at the 1984 meeting of the American Psychological Association Convention, Toronto, Canada. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 261 854).
- Spady, W. G. (1970). Lament for the letterman: Effects of peer status and extracurricular activities on goals and achievement. *American Journal of Sociology, 75*, 680-702.
- Stevens, N. G. (1992). *Factors that promote student extracurricular participation in small Nevada schools*. Unpublished thesis, University of Nevada, Reno.
- Wicker, A. W. (1968). Undermanning, performance and students' subjective experiences in behavior settings. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 10*, 255-261.
- Wicker, A. W. (1969). Cognitive complexity, school size, and participation of school behavior settings: A test of the frequency interaction hypothesis. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 60*, 200-203.
- Willems, E. P. (1967). Sense of obligation to school size and marginality of student. *Child Development, 38*, 1247-1260.