



## IPS' Big Gamble: Smaller is better

*Largest overhaul of its kind in U.S. will begin today*

By Kim L. Hooper

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August 18, 2005: Students returning to Indianapolis Public Schools classes today are stepping into one of the biggest educational experiments in the country. IPS is carving its five high schools into 24 small academies in a sweeping bid to boost test scores and improve abysmal graduation rates. The wholesale overhaul is the largest of its kind in the nation and one that state officials will watch closely as they consider similar changes for the rest of Indiana's high schools. "This is a big deal," said new IPS Superintendent Eugene G. White. "We have thrown caution to the wind. We've broken the laws of nature."

The new, smaller schools will open in the district's existing buildings and require no added teachers to run, officials said. Planning for the change has gone on for two years, and teachers have had weeks of training in preparation for the shift.

Each new high school is organized around themes such as health and wellness, science and technology, leadership and the arts, and each will enroll only a few hundred students.



Those students will keep the same teachers all four years. Backers, including billionaire philanthropists Bill and Melinda Gates, say going small is the key to making sure high schools are successful, creating campuses where every student is known by name and no one slips through unnoticed. Just this week, a new Indiana University survey showed as many as 35 percent of high schoolers feel no teacher cares about them.

Bill Gates believes so strongly that smaller is better that the foundation he and his wife support is sinking billions into helping districts make the change. IPS is getting more than \$5 million of that, which will go to 21 of the 24 academies. The other three do not qualify for foundation money because they have admission requirements. Small high schools are already in place in other states. Ohio is carving 20 large urban schools in 11 cities into 70 smaller schools. Washington state is converting large urban high schools into multiple, smaller academies focused on more personalized learning. And school districts in Baltimore, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles and New York are following suit.

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**[This front page from the Indy Star of August 18, 2005 suggests reasons Dr. Witherspoon may have withdrawn from the selection process for Superintendent of the Indianapolis Public Schools. Items in this SOS Special Issue relate to problems in the Des Moines schools pertaining to uses of the one cent tax levy and new construction.](#)**

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS:

### Cotton Report: School Size, School Climate, School Performance

*Our data, based upon general tendencies, persist in repeating a single message: Smaller seems to be better.*

Robert W. Jewell \*

1. School consolidation took place through much of the Twentieth Century, resulting in fewer and much larger schools and school districts. Consolidation efforts continue into this century and are current today in many areas in the U.S.
2. The research base on the relative effects of large and small schools is large and quite consistent. The research base on the effects of school-within-a-school (SWAS) arrangements is smaller and less conclusive.
3. No fixed agreement exists among researchers and educators about what constitutes a small school or a large school. A majority of researchers indicate an appropriate and effective size as 300-400 students for an elementary school and 400-800 students for a secondary school.
4. Much school consolidation was based on beliefs that larger schools are less expensive to operate and have higher-quality curricula than small schools. Research demonstrates, however, that neither assertion is necessarily true.
5. Academic achievement in small schools is at least equal and often superior to that of large schools.
6. Student attitudes toward school in general and toward particular school subjects are more positive in small schools.
7. Student social behavior, as measured by truancy, discipline problems, violence, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation, is more positive in small schools.
8. Levels of extra-curricular participation are much higher and more varied in small school than in larger ones, and students in small school express greater satisfaction with their extracurricular participation.
9. Attendance is better in small schools than in larger ones.
10. A smaller percentage of students drop out of small schools than large ones.
11. Students have a greater sense of belonging in small schools than large ones.
12. Student levels of academic achievement and general self-concept are higher in small schools.
13. Interpersonal relations between and among students, teachers, and school administrators are more positive in small schools than in large ones.
14. Students from small and large high schools do not differ significantly on college-related variables such as entrance exam scores, acceptance rates, attendance, grade point average, and completion.
15. Teacher attitudes toward their work and their administrators are more positive in small schools.
16. Attributes associated with small school size that researchers have identified as accounting for their superiority include the following:
  - A. Participation by everyone is needed to populate the school offices, teams, clubs, and special events; therefore fewer students are overlooked or alienated.
  - B. Adults and students in the school know and care about one another to a greater degree than is possible in large schools.
  - C. Smaller schools have higher rates of parent involvement.
  - D. Students and staff generally have a stronger sense of personal efficacy in small schools.
  - E. Students in small school take more responsibility for their own learning; their learning activities are often more individualized, experiential, and relevant to the world outside the school; their classes are generally smaller, and scheduling is much more flexible.

F. Grouping and instructional strategies associated with higher student performance are often more easily implemented in small schools, i.e., team teaching, integrated curriculum, multi-age groupings (. elementary), cooperative learning, and performance assessments.

17. The evidence for the effectiveness of school-within-a-school (SWAS) is more limited, but it also suggests that students benefit from this organization if the SWAS is sufficiently separate and distinct from the other school(s) housed in the same building.

18. Poor students and those of racial and ethnic minorities are more adversely affected academically, attitudinal, and behaviorally, by attending large school than are other students. Unfortunately, poor and minority students continue to be concentrated in large schools.

Despite the persuasive support for small schools, a gap remains — indeed grows —between research and practice regarding school size. Kathleen Cotton summarizes: “The preponderance of professional literature in the past decade, writes Williams, indicates that educational researchers support the concept of small school effectiveness. It appears however that the determinants of school size are seldom the result of research. More often, school size is the result of other

factors —political, economic, social, demographic. We who have become convinced of the superiority of small schools have, as our next challenge, the task of communicating our findings to those who have the power to influence decisions about the size of our schools.”

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\* Jewell, R. S. “School and School District Size Relationships: Costs, Results, Minorities, and Private School Enrollments.” *Education and Urban Society* 21/2 (February 1989): 140-153. Professor of Education at the University of Chicago, Jewell finds, among other things, that small schools and districts have higher graduation rates for minorities, even after factoring in controls for the proportion of minority students where most minority students are enrolled in large schools and districts.

## Kathleen Cotton



Kathleen Cotton, whose B.A. was from the University of Oregon and M.A. from Portland State University, both in English. was a research specialist with the School Improvement Program (SIP) and author or co-author of more than 70 publications. School-Improvement Program summaries have identified effective practices in many topic areas, including citizenship education, developing employability skills, educating urban minority youth, building thinking skills, school-wide and classroom discipline, early childhood education, and parent involvement.

During 1987-96, she coordinated the development of the School Improvement Research Series, a collection of syntheses of educational research literature on topics of current interest and feature articles showcasing exemplary school programs from around the U.S. Kathleen Cotton was a Research Associate with Northwest Regional Education Laboratories where she also developed summaries on the effects of school size, teacher expectations, multi-age grouping, and other topics. Another project was a summary of literature on approaches to school downsizing that appear promising for enhancing student outcomes and school safety. Kathleen Cotton died of cancer in 2002.

*Children feel safer and more comfortable in right-sized spaces. They feel confident they can know those places —and can be better known within them. -Asse Eriksen, Director: Architects in Schools, National Endowment for the Arts*

# REASONS FOR HIDING THE COTTON REPORT

Editorial summary by Nan Stillians

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In big American cities, developers moved away from commercial projects toward contracts with non-profits, especially school systems where public tax money was available without the tough negotiations and where oversight standards were generally lax, or non-existent. Currently in Des Moines, certain developers and other private interests influence public projects to their advantage. After the 1999 passage of the one-cent levy to repair Polk County schools, vested interests supported school board candidates who vigorously promoted new construction over maintaining and upgrading old buildings, however excellent certain older structures might be.

Instead of the the repairs and renovations advertised to pass the tax levy, Witherspoon and a board majority used an internally-developed concept called 21st Century Schools to skew planning processes toward new buildings instead of repairs. When they could not force new buildings on site committees (composed of parents and teachers and principals), Witherspoon and members of the Schools-First promotion team forced (often unnecessary) major new additions on these site committees. As evidenced by video-tapes of Board meetings, the Facilities Manager negotiated new construction and major commercial acquisitions which preoccupied Board planning and analysis more than educational policies.

In DM School Board parlance, merger means closing at least one building, usually two. Also, merger means major new construction, a large new building, or big additions. Salvable schools were abandoned, several demolished. Now five more are targets, and a recent REGISTER editorial warns even more may be abandoned without analysis.

In 2000, west-side parents suddenly faced heavy pressure from Witherspoon and certain associates to merge three elementary schools into one huge new one. Alarmed, parents researched the effect of buildings on students, copied their research and presented copies of the huge Cotton Report to Witherspoon and his associates who simply ignored them. Their report and request for discussion was shelved without being discussed.

The Kathleen Cotton report, School Size, School Climate, School Performance, is nationally accepted as the definitive study about the size of learning environments as these relate to education in the U.S. Prior to her collection of data, little was known about the impact of building size on student achievement or well-being. After her exhaustive study, the effects of educational environments on behavior were clear.

Fortified with knowledge that smaller schools are better learning environments for children, these parents resisted Administrative pressure to merge. Hanawalt and Hubbell parents (who also were attorneys, architects, contractors, and facilities managers) joined forces and shared their collective expertise to fight off the merger. The principal siding with Hubbell parents was promptly transferred; and a popular Hubbell parent leading the anti-merger effort considered running for school board. Rumors about a \$10,000 bribe if he were to refrain from becoming a candidate were never confirmed.

The REGISTER, both editorial and news reporters, backed Witherspoon and merger-promoting Board Members. Although Greenwood parents Phil Roeder (currently DMPS Board Chair), editorial writer David Yepsen and others wrote opinion pieces, letters from parents and community activists were not printed. The alarming facts of the west-side struggles never reached the general public nor those parents and teachers elsewhere who were soon to face similar top-down pressures to close neighborhood schools. Closures disrupt learning by busing children around town for a year or so until they finally are moved into new structures, which in some cases are inferior to the older buildings. New is not always better.

Between 2003 and 2005, DMPS board members approved a series of mergers and demolitions planned and managed by Mr. Van Hemert whose constant brag, *On Time & Under Budget* blinded overseers to demons in his details. Also, unnoticed by the media and public were the unusual details of the Mid-project Proposal Management Contact with Taylor-Ohde-Kitchell.

In April 2005, DMPS started sending out news releases about economies-of-scale and bulletins of the-skies-are-falling type, but without any hints of specific plans. These undocumented items were uncritically repeated by local media. In late May, as the school year was coming to an end, students carried home the Memorial Weekend bombshell.

Without warning on Friday before Memorial Day 2005, Deputy Linda Lane sent home announcements of the Administrative intention to close five elementary schools, demolish one, sell Central Campus, and construct two new high schools, one to augment the dubious Pappajohn structure in the downtown Gateway.

Shocked parents, grandparents, neighborhood activists sent out alarms. Within two days, taxpayers throughout town started demanded answers. They called on City Council and Polk County officials to step forward and assist them. The Administration hastily set up meetings in each doomed school with one or two board members assigned to each. Public outrage prevailed. Save Our Schools (SOS) held several public meetings. But Witherspoon and Board members hunkered down, remaining resistant and inattentive to hundreds of protesters. At the Board meeting of May 31st, Oversight Committee Chair David Oman gave an effusive endorsement of the plan.

Again, summaries of the Cotton Report were presented to the Administration and Board. Again, there was no response nor attention paid. In fact, the ranking curriculum specialist glibly dismissed it with the comment that anyone could find research to support anything. As she made her comment in a large protest meeting at Hoover in which individuals were lined up around room to complain to Witherspoon & Board, she realized her mistake, but did nothing to respond to those insisting upon it being entered into the records. Contrary to extensive efforts by Witherspoon and Board members Ward and Roeder to represent this Hoover session and those in the elementary schools as public planning meetings, these were protest sessions in which no genuine dialogue took place despite many ideas presented by the parents, teachers, and other community members.

The Cotton Report was diligently ignored —despite efforts to include it in planning. The Cotton Report is about good Education and good learning environments. This DMPS Administration, driven by covert private interests, is about New Construction.

In Des Moines, for five years, quality education has been curtailed. Good programs have eroded. Music and arts programs shriveled. Only about ten librarians are left in 70 schools. Education was disrupted, and children and educators were shuffled around and compromised. Achievement scores dropped. Tax levy funds disappeared in extravagant unresearched purchases and construction projects.

The legal action brought by the SaveOurSchools (SOS) group was heard by Administrative Judge Carol Greta on October 5, 2005. Recommendations of Judge Greta will go to the State Board of Education meeting in November 2005. The Board of Education could force Witherspoon and the School Board to reconsider closings and new construction and submit to genuine planning processes informed by sound research, fiscal accountability, and sensible analysis. If such is the case, a demand for genuine oversight functions, now currently lacking, may also become formalized and successful.

Nan Stillians  
SOS Coordinator

*For related reading see:*

° Lydia Segal: The Battle Against Corruption in America's Public Schools.

Following is one of many items of information sent to SOS from inside the DMPS system. For obvious reasons, the sender must remain anonymous.

Hello, As I'm sure you in SOS remember that one of the District's selling points to the public to get the votes for the penny sales tax was a promise to replace all old plumbing, wiring and such in all the old school buildings as they were renovated.

Well, you may also know this, but that promise has been repeatedly broken from school to school. Nice new sinks replaced old (not so pretty ones at Moulton). However, the old plumbing was left in the walls, so new sinks had trickles of water because the old pipes were almost full of decades of mineral build-up (and God knows what). Sanitary?

What is morally wrong can never be advantageous, even when it enables you to make some gain that you believe to be to your advantage. The mere act of believing that some wrongful course of action constitutes an advantage is pernicious.

-Marcus Tullius Cicero,  
statesman, orator, writer  
(186-43 BC)



Willard has had brand new cold water fountains unstopped at least twice, once from the roof. Under Duane Van Hemert's direction, contractors typically "close up the wall" with old electrical wiring, plumbing, etc., left in the buildings and not replaced, as was promised.

Under Mr. Van Hemert's leadership, Taylor Ohde Kitchell allowed contractors to leave unfinished work again and again. Then the District's craftsmen (carpenters, plumbers, electricians, painters, sheet metal workers, etc.) repeatedly have been sent in to finish, and sometimes, completely perform the work that contractors were supposed to be responsible for.

One of many examples was one or more commodes mounted on sheet rock walls instead of block, brick or studs. This happened at a new school, Brubaker. When recently confronted with the questions of why general contractors were routinely allowed to leave job sites before work was finished, and why the valuable time of District craftsmen was used to alleviate that unfinished work, Mr. Van Hemert answered that the School District was the general contractor.

To me, that is arrogance and shows the authority he is granted by Dr. Witherspoon. I will not give names of craftsmen that much of this information has come from. However, I am thinking that Suzette Jensen from her time of service on the School Board, might know how to approach things and elicit information without putting anyone on the spot. Many people are afraid of losing their jobs if they speak up publicly. The current administration uses scare tactics and unfair pressure to keep silence in the ranks. I thought this might be valuable information for SOS. I hope it helps in some way.

DMPS Employee

## RELEVANT REVELATION

On Tuesday, June 19, 2001 a group met with Des Moines City Manager Eric Anderson to convince him of the advantages of converting the historic AIB building into condominiums rather than demolishing it, as advocated by several powerful businessmen.

Our group included architects, historians, engineers, and community activists. We were backed by a copy of the city-financed Kotin-Kalinski Commons Plan. Although reported by REGISTER reporter Chris Osher, this sensible plan which advocated regeneration of sound buildings along Locust Street literally disappeared, all but two copies of it, when Fred Weitz and several other powerful CEOs objected to it. We contacted Kotin-Kalinski who sent us copies of their report.

Every argument Anderson gave for demolition of the AIB in the Gateway area (where five local landmark buildings were finally demolished), our group calmly countered with logical reasons to keep it. We took turns citing economic, aesthetic-cultural, historical and tourism advantages for generations of tax-payers. Finally, unable to counter us with sensible reasons, Anderson stood up, leaned forward, and in sound between a plea and a shout, he yowled: You simply must understand this: NEW CONSTRUCTION RUNS THIS TOWN!

Since that June afternoon in City Hall —before 9/11, before abuses of public processes in the Gateway and in DMPS so-called 21st Century Schools plan, before the Iraq war, before escalating costs of building materials and covert decisions about the spending of hundreds of millions of dollars —I learned how important and true that statement by Eric Anderson was. Now, in the Autumn of 2005, it may be accurate to say: NEW CONSTRUCTION RUNS both political parties and certain school boards in central Iowa. NS