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## Small Schools Work, And That's No Game

Perhaps charter schools keep student populations low to game the state funding formula, since staying around the 200-pupil mark gets an extra \$573,000.

Or perhaps charter schools keep student populations low because studies show small schools deliver better outcomes for less money, increasing graduation rates and leveling the playing field for low-income kids.

Albuquerque Public Schools would have you believe the former. APS Superintendent Winston Brooks freed up his number-crunchers to analyze the small-school funding adjustment. They found charter high schools in Albuquerque are clustered around that "sweet spot," with an average enrollment of 230. APS budget director Ruben Hendrickson says charters set their ideal size and are able to stay small because admission is determined by lottery. "Kids are banging on the door, but because they have a choice, they can restrict size."

Maybe kids are banging on the door because at a small charter school they will be more than a number. Maybe more people in authority will know their name, take an interest, serve as a role model.

That level of interaction is difficult for even the most dedicated educators at a school with up to 2,500 students — the upper range for APS high schools, where qualified neighborhood students can't be turned away. A 2006 Gates Foundation study looked at high school dropouts in 25 communities across the country, and the common thread was "a lack of connection to the school environment."

Bruce Hegwer, the executive director of the New Mexico Coalition for Charter Schools, says charters. "stay small because educationally that's what they were created for, is to have that close, personal involvement with students."

There's no question that when funding is at stake some players will game the system; Legislative Finance Committee staff urged state lawmakers last fall to eliminate the small-school adjustment, citing schools that, for example, house multiple "small schools" in the same building to rake in extra cash. On the flip side, Brooks is considering joining the game, reclassifying the mega-district's small alternative schools as "magnate" schools so APS can get an extra piece of the funding pie.

School board member Kathy Korte is wisely counseling against this, saying it would be more beneficial to "really make lawmakers aware of the fact that there is an inequity. We should make sure we are all playing on a level field. Charters have their role in our city and state, but so do our alternative schools."

Given the current hunger for school reform with a focus on improving the state's poor student performance, the Legislature would be wise to listen.