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Smaller schools best for stopping dropouts

Amid the latest hubbub over high-school dropouts, a reminder New Mexico legislators and educators shouldn't need: More than two decades' worth of research has made it resoundingly clear that a key to keeping kids in school is having schools worth staying in.

Super-sized high schools are notorious for alienation and violence. Graduation rates are higher where student bodies aren't bloated.

This isn't just theory: In Cincinnati, a series of smaller schools have replaced the big "factory schools" that were contributing to the decline of that fine Ohio River city. The graduation rate there has soared from 51 percent to 79 percent — and those schools are serving the same neighborhoods and populations as the big schools they replaced.

In New Mexico, 12 of 16 high schools rated "best" by *U.S. News & World Report* have student bodies under 900. The bigger four, it turns out, cater to wealthy populations.

But what about cost? Isn't bigger better? If we cram 3,000 kids into one big campus, isn't there an economy of size?

Nope. When schools get too unwieldy, they take enormous numbers of administrative staff. And because the factory schools tend to be out on the edges of cities, transportation costs go up. Smaller schools can be part of the laudable urban-infill planning process — and kids can walk to class.

Oh, and security: The big schools, sadly enough, demand security forces. The smaller ones don't.

As for differences in construction costs, it turns out there's no discernible difference in school sizes; what's more important is the choice of architect and builder.

Those were among the many excellent points put forth by Think New Mexico, the results-oriented think tank, to the New Mexico Legislature during this year's session. The group was advancing a bill by which money would be funneled to high schools designed for no more than 900 students. That number is an optimum — beyond which education levels tend to take a dive, campuses become gang-ridden and too few youngsters get a chance at extracurricular activities.

Think's bill, in the wake of the most recent reports on educational quality — and students voting with their feet — looks even better now than it did then. It passed the Senate, 28-11, during the last session, but the House of Representatives ran out of time for it. The measure is well worth re-introducing. Proponent Sens. Cynthia Nava, D-Las Cruces, and Sue Wilson Beffort, R-Sandia Park, should stir up some early interest from like-minded representatives.

Gov. Bill Richardson, newly reinvigorated to take on the dropout problem, should see the smaller-school proposal as the effective tool that it is — and give it a leading spot on the wish list that'll be part of his state-of-the-state address in January. In the meantime, he should lose no opportunity to buttonhole senators and representatives about its merits.