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OUR VIEW

Smaller high schools? Yes, come to Think of it

For an idea that's supposed to be from a think tank, this one seems like a no-brainer:

Kids who go to smaller high schools tend to get a better education than the ones herded into huge ones.

Who would argue with that, other than the thankfully rare parents who want their budding Denver Bronco in the biggest scholastic athletic league possible so the professional scouts will come watch him break other kids apart?

Few academic experts favor the 4,000-student campuses where education is dehumanized, where crime thrives and where, on graduation day, total strangers form a cue that takes hours for them to be handed their diplomas?

But just in case some bigger-is-better lobbyist lies in wait to mug school reformers with smaller campuses in mind, Think New Mexico has compiled tons of research to support a case it's planning to present to the next Legislature for more manageable schools.

Think is a nonpartisan public-policy operation that isn't content to just issue reports and hope someone official acts on them. Its projects have their own goals — getting laws passed, gaining legislative appropriations and putting ideas to work.

Among its accomplishments during the decade since it was founded:

- ◆ Making full-day kindergarten available to all our state's kids.
- ◆ Repealing the state sales tax on food.
- ◆ Creating a strategic water reserve to protect our rivers.
- ◆ Reducing the state lottery's operating costs so more money goes into college scholarships.

Still to be achieved is title-insurance reform, and that's on the group's agenda for the next Legislature.

But its latest annual crusade is for school-district planning that won't include the kind of mega-high schools now on the drawing boards in Albuquerque.

Among other things, says Think, the big schools are dropout factories — and in New Mexico, more than in many other parts of the country — dropouts remain a serious problem. According to its figures, barely more than half our state's freshmen make it to graduation.

For that, our state's taxpayers foot big bills — socially and economically. So, say the Thinkers, the Legislature should reduce the matching funds it issues for school buildings to high schools no bigger than 900; 225 per grade.

Think New Mexico has crunched all kinds of numbers to justify a fresh focus on smaller schools — and to shred the myth that bigger schools are cheaper on a per-pupil basis. And the group has lined up loads of expert witnesses and supporting organizations. It also has looked into the facilities that go with mega-schools — auditoriums, gymnasiums, athletic fields, libraries and such — and offers suggestions as to where kids from smaller schools could find such accommodations.

What about the big schools already standing? Think has looked around the country, and come up with ideas for schools within schools; something already being tried here in Santa Fe. Further refinements might come from the group's research.

Our senators and representatives should pay close attention to Think New Mexico's latest work. Its Web site, by the way, is www.thinknewmexico.org.