

Oversights and Insights 2

Lester Flockton

School Merger Happy Stories

Does it not seem a little odd that media, Minister and Ministry stories of post “merger”, “consolidation”, “conglomeration”, “amalgamation”, “aggregation”, “aggravation”, “desecration” or whatever you want to call it (“bigger is better” spins well) are all very hasty, happy, and “see, we told you so”. These stories very commonly come from the newly installed, the elevated, the safe, the winners and survivors, the “I’m all right” Jacks (“We have more money, more staff, more kids, more status, more social security”).

These happy merger stories have little to do with empirical, impartial substantiations about improved learning outcomes – which would be incredibly difficult to prove anyway (so beware of new and forthcoming spin from the horizons). They are simply things that people who occupy vested positions in schools pumped with steroids have to say. They are stories for the consumption of the uncritical masses – those whose thinking can be infected because they do not see themselves as being affected.

So, what is the truth of the matter? Yes, certain conditions are improved. Merged schools are fed a variety carrots (more resources, improved facilities, new paint jobs, more ICT, etc. etc.). Savings from a closed school are devoured by a surviving school – a kind of cannibalism. **But do you really believe that this necessarily improves the quality and richness of learning?**

Merging of schools also allows for picking and choosing a new principal, and you’re only good for that job if you have the youth and ambition to be a flag waving, card holding mergerist who can foresee the benefits of lots of carrots (seeing in the dark, bigger front teeth, and a lot more little rabbits). **But do you really believe that this necessarily improves the quality and richness of learning?**

Merging of schools in a number of areas is economic rationalism. Once upon a time (when we were plagued by rabbits) some schools were situated quite close to each other, albeit a good 30 or more minutes by horse and cart. And families ate lots of carrots those days. But today such schools can be a matter of minutes from each other in one of the family cars, and fewer families are doing their own carrots. So economic rationalism can make very good sense. **But do you really believe that this necessarily improves the quality and richness of learning?**

We now have a growing body of evidence which categorically shows that school size, in itself, is a very weak predictor of student achievement. Likewise, there are studies telling us that expensive technological wizardry and gimmickry does not necessarily lead to the expansion of student’s cognitive capabilities.

So, what is going on here? Economic rationalism! **But do you really believe that this necessarily improves the quality and richness of learning?**

