

The Problem Of The Megaschool

BY ANNA QUINDLEN 3/25/01 AT 7:00 PM

My high school graduating class had 175 students. Last year the same school had 420 seniors. This bit of biographical data comes to you by way of Charles Andrew Williams. He's the latest teenager to become a national bogeyman after being charged with killing classmates in the school corridors, supplanting for the moment the two boys who committed murder and then suicide at Columbine High. I am willing to wager there will be others.

And there will be a rhythm to the event, the wounded witnesses, the court appearance and then the questions. How much blame attaches to divorce and dislocation, how much to easy access to guns? How much culpability must parents share with their son, how much a violent society that plies its children with video shoot-'em-ups? How in the world has high school turned into a ubiquitous venue for homicide?

Was it ever halcyon? The 1989 movie "Heathers," in which Winona Ryder and Christian Slater murder the three most popular girls in the class, has become a cult classic because it captures a persistent fantasy less violent but no less vivid: the fantasy of silencing the cruel and condescending clear-skin crowd. The artists hate the jocks. The jocks hate the nerds. The nerds just hope and pray the day comes to an end without someone stuffing them in a locker.

But American public high schools today are too big, too diffuse for even that sort of easy, painful, solid group identification. Like Columbine, Santana High School, where Williams is accused of killing two, has almost 2,000 students. Five high schools in San Diego County alone have enrollments of more than 3,000. Between 1940 and 1990 the average school enrollment in this country rose more than fivefold, which gives new meaning to the phrase "diploma mill."

It's astonishing that a nation so hugely, flagrantly nostalgic for the personal touch and the family doctor, the community festival and the small town, has

watched quietly while its high schools have grown into big cities. When Bel Kaufman's book about a neophyte teacher in a chaotic New York City classroom, "Up the Down Staircase," became a best seller in 1964, readers in the suburbs considered how lucky they were to have schools where teachers knew every student's name, schools that were sources of security as well as education.

Yet in the last 25 years--as officials have slowly come to realize that high-rise public housing makes its residents feel like rats in a maze and have begun to build small-scale town-house projects; as corporations have combated the cog-in-the-machine effect with retreats and office redesigns--high schools have bucked the intimacy trend, swelling to sizes equal to, even exceeding, the villages they'd once served. Modular classrooms sprang up in parking lots like so many beige shoe boxes, answers to overcrowding seemingly calculated to trigger a sense of dislocation. Attendance was staggered as school buildings reached the bursting point, disturbing any sense of school spirit. Perhaps the boom in small liberal-arts colleges is a testimonial to teenagers' search for the sort of connection that once took place in high school.

The experts say that the megaschool is a big mistake. The National Association of Secondary School Principals concluded in a report in 1996 that creating smaller schools was an essential part of making them better. In the wake of the Columbine shootings James Garbarino of Cornell, an expert on adolescent crime, said that if he could do one thing to stop violence, "it would be to ensure that teenagers are not in high schools bigger than 400 to 500 students." Yet nearly three out of four teenagers today go to a high school with an enrollment of more than 1,000.

And in schools that big there is inevitably a critical mass of kids who are neither jocks nor artists nor even nerds, kids who are nothing at all, nonentities in their own lives. "Even after four years there are lots of kids who don't really stand out, who I don't even know," said one high-school senior in New Jersey who will graduate with a class of 550 and says the current freshman class numbers

more than 700. "It's like being a number, not a person." In such big ponds there are many more small fish. The creditable ballplayer who might have made the team in a smaller school is edged out by better athletes. The artist who might have had work hung in a smaller school is supplanted by abler talents. And the disaffected and depressed boy who might have found a niche, or a friend, or a teacher who noticed, falls between the cracks. Sometimes he quietly drops out. Sometimes he quietly passes through. And sometimes he comes to school with a gun.

Lots of adults will call that an excuse, which is what we call discussion when we would prefer to condemn rather than understand. And school size may be only one small contributing factor experts have connected to school violence. But unlike parental devotion, or individual impulse control, it is a factor that can be changed on a large scale for the good. It would not be practical to raze the brick behemoths countless bond issues built. But some administrators and teachers have tried to find ways to make concentric circles of community within the vast ebb and flow, such as house systems based on common interests, and peer counseling, so that kids will not get lost in the shuffle.

It is not too late to do more, to re-create the more intimate high schools of years past as the burbs continue to boom. Instead of one enormous school to be endlessly expanded, two smaller ones could be created. Some opponents say that that would be more expensive; sadly, some argue instead that it would water down the quality of football and basketball teams, critical elements of secondary school for those who can't see the forest for the trees. It's a high price to pay for a winning season: studies show that smaller schools have higher graduation and attendance rates and lower violence and vandalism rates. It is more difficult to quantify the human toll on the fragile adolescent psyche of being one among so many, to gauge exactly how one forgettable face in the crowd becomes the face on the evening news.