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Small School Closure in Wales: New Evidence

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November 2007

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Preface

Most rural Welsh counties face acute problems with falling pupil numbers and unsustainable small schools. Many have embarked on a reorganisation of their supply of school places. In the nine rural Welsh counties 53 per cent (that is 394 in number) of primary schools have 90 pupils or less and are categorised by the Audit Commission as 'small' and potentially unsustainable. So this is a large Welsh problem.

This new IWA study reports on the experience of closure, amalgamation and reorganisation of primary schools within six communities in two contrasting rural Welsh counties, Pembrokeshire and Powys. Interviews with pupils, teachers and parents, together with data on levels of achievement before and after closure, provide ground-breaking new evidence on the impact of school closures.

For many the findings of the study will be counter-intuitive and controversial. The study asks the following questions:

- What are the effects of amalgamation, reorganisation and small school closure, as seen by head teachers, parents, children, governors, teachers and the communities involved?

- What is the impact of reorganisation and small school closure upon the 'outcomes' of the educational processes in terms of the levels of development of the children affected?

- Where small school closures are necessary how should they be managed to ensure optimum results?

This research would not have been possible without the help and co-operation of a large number of people. The interviewees – head teachers, parents, children, teachers, governors, educational officials and community leaders in Pembrokeshire and Powys – gave generously of their time. They also commented on an early draft of the report, which has considerably improved the final version. The Institute is also grateful to Pembrokeshire and Powys County Councils for the co-operation of their officials and to Professor David Reynolds and Dr Meriel Jones for undertaking this ground-breaking study.

John Osmond
Director, IWA

Chapter One

The Social, Economic and Policy Context for Small Schools in Wales

One of the major trends in the provision of public services over the last twenty years has been a growing preference for larger sizes in the scale of the organisations. For hospitals, universities, schools and other welfare services, greater size is held to deliver 'critical mass', efficiency and the prospects of more effective delivery of services to consumers.

The argument has always been that larger size can produce greater specialisation and therefore greater quality of personnel, economies of scale, and make possible a higher quality work environment for staff that is not possible in smaller organisations.

Internationally, the trend has been towards provision of larger units in the educational sector too. As the years in compulsory education lengthened in the 1960s, and as staying on voluntarily after the compulsory years increased in the 1970s and 1980s, the size of secondary schools also increased. Population movement out of some inner city areas and out of some rural areas were added pressures for consolidating schools into larger units. This movement was supported by the more general notions that 'big is beautiful' that purveyed public welfare ideology. Big schools were meant to indicate newness, commitment to education, strength of purpose and rising expenditure.

Across the industrialised countries of the world large numbers of primary and secondary schools were shut in the 1990s. In the Plains States of the USA and Canada, in the inner cities of the great North American cities, and in many parts of Europe there were multiple closures. In England, 450 rural school closures (mostly primary schools) were approved between 1983 and 1997. In Wales, too, there were widespread closures.

However, by the end of the 1990s, there was a growth of popular movements resisting school closures, particularly of the small, rural primary schools. Parents in schools threatened with closure, and residents concerned to keep their schools and sometimes School Districts in existence, began to argue that while small scale school provision may be more costly, there were advantages. Arguments in favour of small schools included:

- Their levels of academic achievement were higher.
- They helped keep communities functioning, particularly when other local services, for example shops, post offices, pubs, petrol stations, and village halls, were under threat and sometimes closing.
- They helped promote the cultural characteristics of their localities, especially distinctive language communities.

- They helped to stop the population drift out of rural communities by anchoring pupils to their localities.
- They were in part engines of their local economies.

Some of these high profile campaigns in England, often involving middle class parents fighting to save their children's schools in relatively affluent areas such as Surrey, Sussex, Kent and Hampshire, had an influence on governmental thinking. Of course, the hope of preventing rural decline was also influential.

More than 30 rural schools a year closed in England in the mid to late 1990s. However, since August 1999, that figure has dropped to between two and four schools a year. Only 15 rural schools were closed between November 2000 and the end of 2003.

Part of the reason for this was the policy commitments in the English Rural White Paper, published in Autumn 2000. Welcoming its publication, the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment David Blunkett argued that:

> "Village schools play an essential role in many rural communities. We will continue to give them all the support we can. Wherever it makes sense, local schools will be retained".

In England, there is now "a presumption against closure", according to Education Department guidance to School Organising Committees and Adjudicators responsible for considering school closure applications. Large sums of money were also allocated in England under the Administrative Support Fund for Small Schools, £20m in 1999-2000 and a further £60m in 2001-2002. In Scotland too, opinion appears to be turning against the closure of small schools.

However, Welsh Assembly Government control of education policy since 1999 has resulted in starkly divergent policies. In one of her earliest reports as Education Minister to the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee, in October 2001, Jane Davidson argued that, unlike England where a large number of small schools had closed in the 1980s, Welsh school provision still largely "reflects 19th century or early 20th century requirements". She concluded that despite continued protests about the closure of small schools:

> "I do not therefore consider that we are ready, in Wales, to switch to a more restrictive approach".

On this basis, the Assembly Government has consistently argued that it is for local authorities to determine the pattern of their local schools. Closures should be seen as the preserve of local rather than national government. Despite all school closures requiring the approval of the Minister, in all but a couple of exceptional cases this has been automatically forthcoming.

There is little wonder, therefore, that there have been contentious arguments about the need for school closures, school consolidation and school amalgamations. During this period the local authorities and Assembly Government have put forward the following facts:

- In the nine rural Welsh counties, 394 (or 53 per cent) of primary schools can be categorised as small using the '90 pupils or less' Audit Commission definition, so the problem is a large one.

- Small schools cost disproportionately more per pupil than larger schools. The cost in some schools with between 20 and 30 pupils can be up to £7,500 per pupil per year, compared with a national Welsh average for all primary pupils of some £4,000.

- At the same time, these very small schools are where the highest proportion of Wales's 'surplus places' are located.

- Children in small schools stand a greater chance of being educated in multi-age classes, which are argued to be a more problematic learning environment and a more difficult setting for teachers.

- Children in small schools have a more restricted range from which to draw friends, and a reduced chance of finding friends with whom they have things in common.

- Children in small schools have access to a more restricted range of teachers and to fewer extra curricular activities.

- Teachers in small schools have a more difficult professional role, caused by the multiplicity of specialisms they are required to have. They may also be more isolated from specialist sources of support, and from professional development opportunities, especially where small schools are geographically remote.

- Small schools tend to be housed in older, more unsuitable buildings whose environment is hard to characterise as suitable for modern educational purposes.

In contrast, the following arguments are made that small, often rural, primary schools should be protected. It is claimed that small schools:

- Obtain good levels of academic achievement.[1]

- Minimise children's travel to school times or 'downtime', and maximise their 'useful' time or 'uptime'.

- Help preserve the Welsh language. They are often situated in areas where the Welsh language has been threatened by increased Anglicisation, by

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[1] This is an argument which is difficult to resolve in the absence of all the Key Stage assessment results for the primary schools of Wales. In this respect it is interesting to note the *Times Educational Supplement Cymru*'s use of the Freedom of Information Act to obtain these data for the 2004-5 academic year (15 September 2006). Whereas nearly 30 per cent of schools in Wales were of 100 or fewer pupils, these smaller schools comprised 63 per cent of the schools at which all the Year Eleven pupils achieved the standard expected for their age in English/Welsh, maths and science (the so called 'core subject indicator'). Crucially, these smaller schools were spread fairly evenly across the full range of free school meal entitlement, with just over half above the Welsh average and just under half below it. As a result the 'positive small school effect' seemed a genuine one as opposed, for example, to a 'quality of intake' effect. But of course these small schools included large numbers of reorganised, 'area' schools as well as numbers of very small schools that might be reorganised, so we remain unclear about where any positive small school effect may be coming from.

younger native Welsh speakers moving out, and by the arrival of families of English speakers drawn to the Welsh speaking heartland because of its promised enhanced quality of life.

• Provide a more 'family like' environment than larger schools, that nurtures children's identities.

• Are likely to be able to relate more directly to the parents of their pupils, given the close links characteristic of rural small towns and villages. As a result they promote children's development through parental supervision of homework and participation in school events.

We should note that the arguments against closure have been marshalled by a number of pressure groups, in particular by the National Association for Small Schools.[2] They argue that in England smaller schools, defined as those with less than 100 pupils, do better in the evidence generated by the English school inspection body OFSTED. However, it is unclear whether this reflects the operation of socio economic factors. In Scotland, they argue that pupils living in 'remote' areas are more likely to go to Higher Education than their urban counterparts. Again, however, the size of the 'remote' schools is unclear, although there is an even more powerful positive effect on the disadvantaged than on other pupils.

The National Association for Small Schools helpfully distinguishes between the small school (up to 100 pupils) and the very small school (up to 50 pupils), a distinction which will become important when we look at our research evidence later. But the gist of their case is that small provision is at least as good as large provision, and often better.

The arguments for and against school closure have been made with considerable force by the various protagonists. In the last few years the temperature of the debate has risen as a number of councils have announced reviews of their existing school provision, and in some cases closure plans. In 2004 Carmarthenshire announced proposals for a programme of school closures, amalgamations and rebuilding which might have led to a closure of up to 40 small, mostly rural primary schools. In Powys, there have been a number of high profile cases in which closure proposals have been opposed, and in some cases prevented by parental pressure. One case was in Llandinam near Newtown. Denbighshire announced plans for the possible closure of 14 schools in 2005. In 2007 Cardiff followed suit, involving in this case some rationalisation of secondary provision too.

There has been a rapid growth in parental associations against closure, such as the Association of Small Schools. Other organisations that oppose closures include the Farmers Union of Wales, Merched Y Wawr, The Welsh Language Society, the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales and the Wales Young Farmers Association.

Generally, however, education officials and councils have tended to support the arguments for rationalisation or closure. These have been reinforced by the following considerations:

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[2] See, for example, Benford, M., *We Need More Small Schools*, National Association for Small Schools: Oxfordshire, 2007.

- Pressure from the Assembly Government, Estyn and the Audit Commission to cut 'surplus places'. These are said to be a higher proportion of all places in Wales than in England, 13 rather than 12 per cent in one survey. Depending on how they are calculated, these are said to be taking up to £500 per pupil place per year out of the overall resources available for all schools.

- Pressure to improve the quality of school buildings by the year 2010. This is a problem for all councils given the very large backlog of minor repairs and overdue building maintenance, let alone the basic age and adequacy of the school building stock. The capital expenditure necessary to improve that stock is widely seen as inadequate. The English capital spend for 2006-07 will be approximately £8 billion, whereas the Welsh will be only £180 million. Given that Wales has approximately 6 per cent of England's population (3 million as against 50 million), the Welsh figure should be £480 million if we were spending on the same basis as England.

- The reduced size of the birth cohorts in the first few years of the century (although paradoxically in 2006 the size of the birth cohort actually increased from its historically low base), with its implications for schools as these cohorts enter primary and early years settings from 2009-10.

- The predicted tough funding settlements for the Assembly Government from 2007 onwards. There is a corresponding pressure on local authorities to maximise savings in core expenditure areas within the education budget to permit increased or new spend on new policy concerns, such as the Children's Agenda.

In these circumstances, the often traumatic nature of the reorganisation process for those involved, together with the general 'heat' of the situation as groups and individuals argue, cries out for the 'light' of impartial research. Questions that need to be asked include:

- What are the effects of amalgamation, reorganisation and small school closure, as seen by head teachers, parents, children, governors, teachers and the communities, themselves?

- What does research say about the effects of reorganisation and small school closure upon the 'outcomes' of the educational processes in terms of the levels of development of children?

- If there does need to be some closure of small schools, how might these be managed to ensure optimum results?

Chapter Two

Existing Research on the Effects of Small Schools

Given that small school closures, and opposition to them, are an international phenomenon, it is instructive to survey the world's research literature on the topic.[3] Overall, the literature shows an impressive consistency in judging that small school size appears to have positive effects.[4] Pupil academic achievement is of considerable importance.   As one 1996 review of 103 studies (cut subsequently to 31 relevant to this issue) concluded:

> "About half the student achievement research finds no difference between the achievement levels of students in large and small schools, including small alternative schools. The other half finds student achievement in small schools to be superior to that in large schools. None of the research finds large schools superior to small schools in their achievement effects. Consequently, we may safely say that student achievement in small schools is at least equal – and often superior – to student achievement in large schools."[5]

Other positive impacts of small schools have been recorded as follows:

- Greater parental involvement.[6]
- More positive pupil attitudes.[7]
- Improved pupil behaviour.[8]
- Greater extra curricular activities by pupils.[9]
- Better attendance.[10]
- Staying on after the compulsory years.[11]
- An enhanced sense of belonging.[12]
- More positive teachers' attitudes.[13]

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[3] A review of literature was undertaken by searching bibliographic databases, in particular the Education Resources Information Centre, the world's major clearing house of educational research, focussing on studies of primary schooling.

[4] See Barker, R. G. and P. V. Gump, *Big school, small school: High school size and student behaviour,* Stanford University Press, California, 1964; Schneider, M., *Do school facilities affect academic outcomes?* Paper prepared for the National Clearing House for Educational Facilities, Washington, D. C., 2002; and Cotton, K., *School size, school climate, and student performance*, Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1996.

[5] Cotton, *Ibid.*

[6] Schneider *op cit.*

[7] Raywid, M. A., *Current literature on small schools.* Education Resources Information Centre, 1999.

[8] Stockard, J. and M. Mayberry, 'Resources and school classroom size', in *Effective Educational Environments,* Newbury Park, Corwin Press Inc., California, 1992.

[9] Walberg, H. J., 'On local control: Is bigger better?', in *Source book on school and district size, cost and quality*, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, Minnesota University, Minneapolis, pp.118-34, 1992.

[10] Fowler, W. J., 'School size and student outcomes', in H. J. Walberg (Ed.), *Advances in Educational Productivity,* vol. 5, JAI Press, Connecticut, pp. 3-26, 1995.

[11] Toenjes, L. A., *Dropout rates in Texas school districts: influences of school size and ethnic group*, Texas Centre for Educational Research, 1989.

[12] Gregory, T., *Small is too big: Achieving a critical anti-mass in the high school*, Position paper prepared for the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1992.

So clear is the totality of the findings that many in the North American educational research and practice communities now wish to break down what they see as their monolithic high schools into much smaller, sub units that offer pupils a greater chance of 'belonging'.[14] Indeed, since 1995 the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in the USA has granted $837 million to fund pilot projects in more than 2,000 high schools to show how this may be done. Interestingly, the pilots have resulted in mixed evaluation results. More recently the Gates Foundation has been experimenting with factors other than size, leading some American commentators to begin to argue that 'small is not enough'.

Moreover, there are a large number of limitations with the datasets we examined when applying them to the situation in Wales:

- Nearly all of the studies have been based on American schools, reflecting the considerable focus that American educational researchers historically have given 'size' as a factor. In contrast British studies have been more interested in class size than school size.

- Of the 69 studies reviewed extensively by Kathleen Cotton in her 1996 Oregon study of school size and pupil performance, 42 give no size information on what were their 'big' or 'small' schools in terms of pupil numbers.

- In the 27 studies that mention size, the top limit of the small schools runs from 200 to 1,000 students, with the top limit of the large schools from 300 to 5,000 pupils. In fact, most of the data sets are from secondary schools rather than from primary ones.

- Kathleen Cotton herself shows the huge difference between the USA, where virtually all the research was conducted, and Wales when she makes clear that she sees the effective *small* size for a primary school as between 300 and 400 students. a size that of course in the Welsh context would represent a very large, rather than a small, school.

There are further problems with the available studies that we examined:

- They focus on secondary far more than primary schools. Of course, in Wales the debate overwhelmingly concerns primary schools.

- There are questions about how effectively the American studies control for the effects of the socio-economic background of the pupils compared with school size. There is a tendency for small schools to have heavily differentiated groups of parents, such as the disadvantaged in small urban schools and the advantaged in small rural ones.

- Many of the studies have small sample sizes. Others are atypical in nature and even downright weird, especially the 'one-off' studies celebrating the

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[13] Gottfredson, D. C., *School size and school disorder*, Baltimore, MD.: Centre for Social Organisation of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 1985.
[14] Ayers, W. , Bracey, G., and Smith, C., *The ultimate education reform? Make schools smaller*, Centre for Education Research, Analysis and Innovation, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2000.

unusually effective small schools that appear to be administered by unusual people.

More recent research and reviews of research undertaken by the international school effectiveness community has found it hard to justify 'size' as a factor that has much influence upon how schools perform, or even how pupils develop. School effectiveness studies undertaken in the 1970s did not find that small size added more 'value' to pupils' development.[15] Neither is size important in the balance of the evidence in some of the 'meta-reviews' of the field.[16] Again, a great many of these studies are on secondary rather than primary schools, which makes them largely irrelevant in the Welsh context.

At the same time, there has been a flurry of more recent studies – again mostly from North America – that have found no advantage for small schools and no disadvantage for those larger. In Kentucky, 2005 data showed that, after controlling for the intakes, larger primary schools scores on basic achievement tests were generally as high or higher than those attending smaller schools.[17]

In a range of studies performed by teaching staff and doctoral students at the University of South Carolina, there are often varied and sometimes contradictory results. Indeed, pupil outcomes appear to be heavily related to student socio economic backgrounds. And as far as primary schools are concerned, larger ones appear to perform better, although for middle schools the conventional finding of the superiority of small size is shown.[18] Both these studies are generated by the American State's Departments of Education (akin to our local education authorities) so it is difficult to assess their validity, by comparison with material appearing in a peer reviewed journal.

In Australia, a 1997 study examined the quality of school life as seen by the students in Catholic high schools, and found no relationship between school size and the perceived quality of school life.[19]

Again in the United States, recent research has found that large schools, with between 1,200 – 1,800 students, and extra large schools, with more than 1,800 students, perform better than small schools, with fewer than 600 pupils, and medium size schools with between 601-1200 students.[20] This was after controlling for students' family and educational backgrounds, although these studies also report higher dropout rates as well as higher leaving rates for the very large schools. Again, however, these studies are only conference presentations, not articles in peer reviewed journals, so it is difficult to assess their usefulness.

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[15] See Reynolds, D., 'The Delinquent School', in P. Woods (Ed.), *The Process of Schooling*, Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1976; and Rutter, M. Maughan, B. Mortimore, R. and Ouston, J., *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children,* Open Books, 1979.

[16] Teddlie, C. and Reynolds, D., *The International Handbook Of School Effectiveness Research,* Routledge Falmer, 2001.

[17] See http://www.kc.ky.gov/lrepubs/RR334.pdf

[18] See http://www.edfacilities.org/pubs/sizeoutcomes.pdf

[19] Mok, M. and Flynn, M., 'Does school size affect quality of school life?' *Issues in Educational Research,* 7(1), pp. 69-86, 1997.

[20] Rumberger, R. V. and Polardy, G. P., *The effect of student composition on student learning in High School*, American Educational Research Association, Seattle, Washington, 2001, and *Raising test scores and reducing dropout: Can schools do both?* American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisianna, 2002; Palardy, G. P., *A comparison of hierarchical linear and multilevel structural equation growth models*, Unpublished Dissertation. University of California, Santa Barbara, 2003.

In the United Kingdom, research results now also appear to be less unequivocally in favour of small size. A 2004 study showed that medium size secondary schools have more positive examination outcomes than very large or very small schools.[21] An earlier 1998 study argued that after controlling for social background, the optimum size for maximising the examination performance of secondary schools is about 1,200 for ages 11 to 16 schools, and 1,500 for 11 to 18 schools, sizes which are considerably higher than the existing mean school size.[22]

Lastly, a 2006 'meta-review' of studies related to the school size issue, from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development member countries, systematically summarises research from 31 studies selected on grounds of scientific adequacy, from 229 articles, in turn selected on the basis of being cited in one of 3,874 citations.[23] This found that larger schools appear to do better on examination results and attendance, but that this effect disappears when the schools become very large. On the other hand, teachers and pupils at smaller schools are more likely to have a positive perception of their school environment. However, whatever their high levels of research and rigour, the exclusive focus of the studies upon secondary education reduces their usefulness when applied to primary schools.

The shift in the balance of the research evidence that we found is difficult to understand. The following considerations may be part of the explanation:

- Schools that historically were 'small', in recent years have become 'very small'. Population changes have reduced their pupil numbers to levels to a point where the school becomes ineffective rather than effective.

- Schools that were historically 'large' have realised that large size is problematic for pupil development, and have begun to build smaller units, such as Houses, or schools-within-schools with which young people can better identify.

- Larger schools may be the result of 'good' or effective schools becoming larger due to parental choice, an impact that extends increasingly through the education systems of the world.

Alternatively, the shift in emphasis may reflect nothing more than the random loading of a few studies into a few years. We cannot tell, although the shift is noticeable.

All the studies we have reviewed share certain characteristics. They were not about Wales nor undertaken in Wales. They suggest that the most important determinants of how children perform lie in their background, the community characteristics of their schools and the cultural, social and environmental

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[21] Spielhofer, T. Benton, T. and Schagen, I., 'A study of the effects of school size and single sex education in English schools', *Research Papers in Education,* 19(2), pp. 138-159, 2004.
[22] Bradley, S. and Taylor, J., 'The effect of school size on exam performance in secondary schools', *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 60(3), pp.291-324, 1998.
[23] Newman, M. Garett, Z. . Elbourne, D. Bradley, S. Noden, P. Taylor, J. and West, A., 'Does secondary school make a difference?' *Educational Research Review,* 1(1), pp. 41-60, 2006.

resources available to them. However defined, by comparison school size is not a huge determinant of educational achievement.

This is a finding that all involved in the debate on the future of small schools in Wales need to remember. If we wish to improve our children's levels of attainment, then the most reliable way would be to combat social disadvantage in schools of all sizes.

Furthermore, in all the publications we surveyed the influence of a wide range of background factors were studied *at a point in time*, which poses problems of analysing which factors are more important. This is especially the case if the factors themselves are highly inter-correlated, for example with poorer children going more to larger, urban schools. We could find no studies that were scientifically 'experimental' in design, where researchers allocated a group of children to a reorganisation or closure situation, with a second group of children as a 'control'. Of course, such a study would be very difficult to undertake.

But we found no examples either of the 'experiment of nature' or 'naturally occurring experiment' where, by chance, a school closes or reorganises and then the experience and outcomes of the process are compared to outcomes of a similar group or groups of children whose school, or schools, naturally didn't shut. An exception is a study done 25 years ago in Scotland for the Scottish Education Department which we were unable to locate in time for this project.[24]

Such a research design is much stronger than studying a group of children at a point in time. It examines a process over time, 'controlling out' any differences in social background since it looks at similar children as the control. We were, of course, unable to do a 'prospective' study in which we looked at a group of children experiencing closure, because when we conducted the research in Spring and Summer of 2007 we knew of no schools reorganising.

What we were able to do was look 'retrospectively' at what happened in an 'experiment of nature', and ask historically based questions. What we did is described in Chapter Three.

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[24] Forsyth, D., *The Rural Community and The Small School,* Edinburgh: Scottish Education Department, 1983.

Chapter Three

The Research Study

We planned our research to be as comprehensive as possible in terms of the range of data to be collected, and from as many people and organisations as possible. Two counties were chosen as generally representative of the issues we were addressing, Pembrokeshire and Powys. In each we identified three case studies of schools whose current formation was the outcome of a rationalisation process that had been undertaken, usually involving the closure of other schools in the locality

Each school was contacted to explain the purposes of the research and to arrange an initial interview with the Head teacher. Further interviews were proposed within the school with representatives of the following groups:

- Two governors
- Two teachers
- Two parents
- Two pupils

In each case one representative was to be from a school that was closed to feed the new school, and one was to be from the existing school that the other schools had joined.

In a couple of schools it was not possible to interview any children as the time lapse between amalgamation or closure and the present day was too great to ask about what had happened. There were also a small number of non-respondents in Powys – one parent from an 'accepting' school, and one teacher who had moved away since a school had closed.

Interviews were conducted face to face, in private, with respondents being asked questions and their answers being noted down as they spoke. Transcribing them, and checking material, was done at the end of the day of the interviews.

We also asked for the views of Directors of Education, councillors, pressure groups and other community representatives, face to face, by email and by correspondence, as appropriate.

The Interview Schedules for the various groups are available in full in Appendix One. Questions 1, 2 and 3 (for the adult respondents) were used to furnish data on the history of the schools chosen and the reorganisation procedures followed. These are reported for Pembrokeshire and Powys in the rest of this chapter.

Pembrokeshire

Since 1996 Pembrokeshire has embarked upon a strategic programme of reorganisation and investment to reduce its 21 per cent surplus in school places. The authority has committed to providing high quality educational opportunities and improved accommodation and resources for children and local communities. Projections for the authority show a continuing decline in the number of children that will attend school. The authority also has a number of school buildings that pre-date the 19th century.

While the Audit Commission defines a small school as having 90 pupils or less, the authority is committed to reviewing schools with fewer than 57 pupils. Despite initial opposition to many of its proposals, the authority believes that a higher proportion of people involved are now supportive of the process.

The authority has also committed to a programme of investment, placing all savings from reorganisation back into the education budget. The new schools being developed are to become more community-focussed and are planned to have a lifespan of at least 40 years. As Pembrokeshire's 2004-9 School Organisation Plan notes:

> "Resources should be targeted towards teaching and learning and the raising of educational standards rather than maintenance of surplus places."

The three Pembrokeshire primary schools are as follows, together with some indication of their history and reorganisation stories:

Ysgol-Y-Frenni Community Primary School

Ysgol-Y-Frenni Community Primary School is purpose built and formed from the old primary school building that was Ysgol Crymych, together with new buildings which were added to the site. In 2007 it had 166 pupils.

The school resulted from the closure of three schools in 2004:Ysgol Crymych with 98 pupils; Ysgol Hermon, 50; and Ysgol Blaenffos, 28. Both Hermon and Blaenffos villages are located within two miles of the larger town of Crymych. The Head teacher at Ysgol Crymych became Head teacher of Ysgol-Y-Frenni, which became one school legally in September 2004. The official opening took place in November 2006 due to building delays.

Once the school was ready, and prior to its opening, the children from the joining schools were brought to see it. It was reported that they were excited about their new purpose-built school. During 2004-2005 a great deal of emphasis was placed on children from all three schools jointly taking part in the choir competition in the Cardiff National Eisteddfod, which helped them bond. Years 5 and 6 had many trips to the school prior to opening to encourage them and for them to meet each other.

Maenclochog Community Primary School

Historically, there was a small school in Penffordd which was naturally declining in numbers, as it was more of a hamlet than a village. The existing school was a very small building and didn't even have its own kitchen, with food being brought into the school. There were only 17 children in the school when it closed in July 2001 - 5 or 6 of those went elsewhere as their parents didn't want Welsh medium education for them.

Ysgol Maenclochog, the receiving school, now has 105 pupils, compared with 94 pupils in 2001. It was improved, with the main old building being kept and a new extension added. Placing the whole school under one roof was greatly welcomed since originally there were four separate buildings. Some were portakabins which were damp and the children had to put on and take off their outdoor clothes when they needed to move from one building to another.

Monkton Priory Community Primary School

This case-study was unusual as the request for an amalgamation between two schools was instigated by the schools themselves. The county were pleased as it needed to rationalise school provision.

There were two separate schools on the site – Monkton Infants School with 128 pupils, and Priory Junior School, with 158 at the time they amalgamated in September 2001. The new school now has 219 pupils.

Both schools were in separate buildings. Each had separate car parks and playgrounds. However, they had a joint governing body, although the infant governing body could only vote on infant school issues and likewise for the junior governing body.

Physically joining the two schools was straightforward. An adjoining wall was taken down, with some redesigning of the grounds. The Head teacher of the old junior school became Head of the new school. No one lost their jobs in the reorganisation, which meant that the new school started with a positive spirit.

Questionnaire Responses

The response to the core questions to the 21 stakeholders in Pembrokeshire about the effect of school closure were overwhelmingly favourable to closure. The stakeholders were three Head teachers, six governors, six parents and six teachers. The full results are provided in Appendix Two.

On the results of amalgamation (Question 4):

- 95 per cent said the effectiveness and quality of education had improved.
- 80 per cent said the efficiency and cost per head had improved.

- 76 per cent said that academic standards had improved.
- 95 per cent said that the social aspects of education had improved.
- 61 per cent said that the situation of the Welsh language had improved.
- 52 per cent that the community had improved (with only 24% saying that it had worsened or stayed the same.

The sample split virtually 50:50 on the somewhat vexed issue of travel times, with 10 out of 21 saying they had increased and 10 that they had stayed the same.

Changes for the children as a result of the reorganisation (Question 5) were overwhelmingly to do with better facilities, more opportunities, higher standards, more space, more confidence and the advantages of a larger peer group with more potential friends of their own age for each child.

Changes for the teachers (Question 6) were enhanced professional development, responsibility for sole curriculum areas rather than multiple ones, and the teamwork and collaboration that was possible with greater staff numbers.

The entire sample (Question 7) said that the situation after amalgamation had been happier. Two thirds of the sample (14 out of 21) could think of no disadvantages at all. Only a small number mention practical issues concerning the reorganisation.

The advantages of amalgamation (Question 9) were seen as the new buildings, better facilities, more teamwork among teachers, more opportunities for all, more space and higher staff morale.

Lessons to be learned (Question 10) entailed better communication with the Local Education Authority, the need for the physical move itself to be better planned and for better induction and preparation when the move was imminent. Perhaps predictably, 95 per cent of the sample had a more favourable view about school closure as a result of their experiences of it.

Finally, we consider the children's responses to the situation they had been through in two of the three schools. In the third the Head teacher thought children could not really be interviewed about events that had happened six years previously. Given the centrality of the child in the educational experience, it is important to report the views of the children in full. The following comments are based upon two children from the closing schools and two from the receiving schools.

Question 1 (Closing school): What was your old school like?

> *It was good, not very different. Mr. X came to see us. I did like Mrs. Y.*
> *It was good. We had Mrs Y. She'd give us a sticker. We miss her, but she does come back to see us sometimes.*
> *It was nice. Both my sisters went there. We had less than 30 of us in school.*
> *Most of us were in two classes. We had two teachers and one helper.*

Question 1 (Accepting school): What was this school like before all the children from the other school/s came here?

> *It was quite small. It had about 95 children. It was a friendly school. Mr Z was the Head teacher. There were about 15 kids my age. It was cramped and too small. We were moved to Ysgol Blaenffos while the changes were made to this school. This was a bit of a change.*

Question 2 (Closing school): What was it like coming to this school from the other one?

> *It hasn't changed much, but it is better. It's easier for the teachers having one Head teacher.*
> *Not much difference. I think it's better now. I can do more things – lots of different things like football.*
> *It was hard. It's bigger and there are more children here. I now have to go to school on a bus instead of in the car. At first I didn't know anyone from Crymych or Hermon, but I've got a lot more friends now.*

Question 2 (Accepting school): What was it like when all the other children came here?

> *It was odd at first. Some people I'd never seen before came. It was strange because so many children came to my school. I got used to it very quickly.*
> *I made a lot of new friends. Some I knew before from playing rugby in the local club. There's no bullying or nastiness at all.*

Question 3 (Closing school): Do you like this school more or less?
Question 3 (Accepting school): Did you like it more or less after they came to this school?

More	4
Less	0
Same	0
Unsure	0

Question 4 (Closing school): Do you get on with the new teachers in this school as well as the teachers in your old school?
Question 4 (Accepting school): Do you get on with the new teachers as well as teachers already at this school?

Better	4
Worse	0
As well as	0
Unsure	0

16

Question 5: Do you try as hard in the lessons now as you did before?

More	2
Less	0
Same	2
Unsure	0

Question 6: Are you as happy now as you were before?

More happy	3
Less happy	0
Same	1
Unsure	0

Question 7: Do you get on with the new children?

Yes	4
No	0
Unsure	0

Question 8: Do you speak Welsh as much as before?

More	0
Less	0
Same	4
Unsure	0

Question 9: Do you have more things to do now than before? (e.g. sports, clubs, choir).

Yes	4
No	0
Unsure	0

It is noteworthy that these four children have seven different opportunities in their answers to be negative about the changes that have happened. They could like their new situation less, try less hard, speak less Welsh, be less happy and so on. Out of 28 opportunities (7 questions times four children), they are never more negative than giving a neutral response. Three quarters of their responses (21 out of 28) are positive.

For Pembrokeshire therefore, the perceptions of both adults and children are overwhelmingly favourable to closure and amalgamation.

Powys

Following a six-month period of consultation, Powys adopted a radical policy aimed at significantly reducing the number of its primary schools during the period 2006 to 2010. The county is large with a population scattered across small market towns, villages, hamlets and isolated farms.

The county has more than 100 primary schools, and about half have fewer than 90 pupils. Many have very few pupils indeed, leading to just one or two teachers, and often there are two or three age groups per class. The school building maintenance backlog exceeds £60 million and 40 schools have a surplus capacity of more than 25 per cent.

The annual cost per head of primary school education in the county ranges from £2,000 to £7,000 and, generally speaking, the smaller the school, the higher the cost. In 2005, 42 of the primary schools were predicting deficits in their budgets. Against this background, the council's strategy aims to reach a level of provision in which:

- The norm will be single form entry, though in some instances the need to keep travel time to a reasonable level will result in two age groups per class.
- The maximum travel time will be no more 30 minutes each way.
- Pupils will benefit from peer interaction.
- Allowance will be made in each school for a Head teacher's room, an administrative office, and staff accommodation.
- The level of funding per pupil will be between 85 per cent and 120 per cent of the average for all schools.

To meet these objectives it is envisaged that 30 primary schools will need to be closed over the next four years. It is acknowledged that achieving this target will be difficult in the face of opposition from parents and community activists. As a result it may take as much as eight years before the full rationalisation programme can be completed.

Descriptions of the schools involved in the study in Powys follow. The County Council preferred anonymity for the three case-studies chosen.

Community Primary School A

The pupils from one closed school came to primary school A along with a few from another closing school. A twelve month closure notice was given for both

schools. There were a number of talks from the Local Education Authority, and parents were given the option of where to send their children. Transport implications were fully discussed with parents. Children visited to familiarise themselves with the new school, before they started their formal education. Parent evenings were arranged. Two schools were closed in July 2005 and Primary School A opened in September 2005.

Community Primary School B

On closure, parents and children were given the option to choose which school they wished to attend, and eight children came to School B from the closing school, ranging in ages from Year 1 to Year 6.

These children took pupil numbers to more 30 in some classes. However, the school benefited from extra funding to employ an additional person for teaching support to compensate for the extra numbers. Closure seemed to have been handled very effectively as the children seemed to be settled and happy.

Community Primary School C

Closure happened about 12 years ago and the present Head teacher was not in post when it happened. Four schools in the area were closed and a new, purpose-built school opened. The Head teacher at the time was appointed a term before the school was officially opened.

Questionnaire Responses

As with Pembrokeshire, the core questions in Powys went to the Head teachers, teachers, parents and governors, together with four children - 19 in all. Children were only interviewed in two of the schools because one of the schools closed a long time ago and no children would have remembered it. The full results from the questionnaires can be seen in Appendix Two.

As with Pembrokeshire, opinion was uniformly favourable to reorganisation followed by closure (Question 4):

- 84 per cent thought the quality of education had increased.
- 78 per cent said the efficiency of education had increased.
- 63 per cent said educational standards had increased.
- 68 per cent that social factors had improved.
- 63 per cent thought that use of the Welsh language had been enhanced.

However, only 37 per cent thought that the community had improved, with a further 37 per cent thinking it had stayed the same and 21 per cent believing it had worsened. A high 74 per cent thought that travel times had increased.

Views about changes in education (Question 5) were very similar to those in the Pembrokeshire sample. Better provision, a larger pool of teachers, greater number of age peers and more opportunities were referred to most.

For the teachers the situation in Powys was clearly different to Pembrokeshire (Question 6). A majority of respondents noted that 'no teachers came', meaning that no teachers had transferred with their pupils. Nevertheless, as with Pembrokeshire, enhanced team working, improved professional development, more facilities and greater opportunity for sharing good practice were mentioned.

As with Pembrokeshire, 84 per cent of the Powys sample thought that there had been a positive change in attitudes to amalgamation (Question 7).

Unlike Pembrokeshire, however, only 32 per cent of the Powys sample saw no disadvantages with reorganisation, with 37 per cent mentioning negative effects on the community where schools had closed. Others referred to negative effects as a result of uprooting children and increased travel times (Question 8).

As with Pembrokeshire, the advantages in Powys were seen as more peers of the same age from whom children could choose friends, more opportunities, greater facilities and a broader curriculum (Question 9). As with Pembrokeshire, in Powys the lessons to be learned were seen as a need for better communication, the avoidance of 'school closure blight and uncertainty' and the need to chart success stories of reorganisation (Question 10). A large majority, of respondents (74 per cent) said that they had formed more favourable views of rural school closure as a result of the experience. This was somewhat less than Pembrokeshire, but still a considerable majority.

Finally, as with Pembrokeshire, we conclude with the views of those who are central to the educational process, the children. Again, they were favourably disposed to reorganisation. There were 28 possibilities to be negative (4 children times 7 questions) producing only three negative answers. For 25 possible answers, the children chose either a positive or neutral view of the effects of educational reorganisation.

Question 1 (Closing school): What was your old school like?

> *It was nice. It was fun. When we left there were 12 pupils. Some left at Christmas – there were 15 before that. It was a very small school. There were three children my own age. It was very sad to leave.*

> *It was very nice. I loved it. It's hard not crying because we live near it and it's empty now.*

Question 1 (Accepting school): What was this school like before all the children from the other school/s came here?

> *Kind, helpful, I'm very happy here. I like the school. It's a good school. It was a good idea bringing in the children before they moved here.*
> *It was OK. It was a bit different when the other children came.*

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Question 2 (Closing school): What was it like coming to this school from the other one?

> *It was a bit scary – from 12 to 112 children. We had five different days to come here to get used to it. I spent whole days here with the other children. I enjoyed those days, it helped me be less scared of coming here.*
> *It was scary. My old school was smaller than this school. It was nerve wracking. It's good now. I'm used to it. I've made lots more friends.*

Question 2 (Accepting school): What was it like when all the other children came here?

> *It just got a bit busier. More people turned up for the Christmas plays. Three children came into my class. There was no difference to the class. I made friends with the new children very quickly. On the five introduction days the children were settled into their classes.*
> *There were more children in my class. More people to play sports – it made it better. I made more friends. We could play more in teams.*

Question 3 (Closing school): Do you like this school more or less?
Question 3 (Accepting school): Did you like it more or less after they came to this school?

More	2
Less	1
Same	1
Unsure	0

Question 4 (Closing school): Do you get on with the new teachers in this school as well as the teachers in your old school?
Question 4 (Accepting school): Do you get on with the new teachers as well as teachers already at this school?

Better	0
Worse	0
As well as	3
None came	1
Unsure	0

Question 5: Do you try as hard in the lessons now as you did before?

More	1
Less	0
Same	3
Unsure	0

Question 6. Are you as happy now as you were before?

More happy	0
Less happy	0
Same	4
Unsure	0

Question 7: Do you get on with the new children?

Yes	4
No	0
Unsure	0

Question 8: Do you speak Welsh as much as before?

More	2
Less	0
Same	2
Unsure	0

Question 9: Do you have more things to do now than before (for example, sports, clubs, choir)?

Yes	2
No	2
Unsure	0

Overall, the responses of children and adults in Powys were favourable, but not as favourable as those in Pembrokeshire.

We have not attempted to combine the responses of the 48 adults and children from both educational authorities. There would have been no point, since opinion was overwhelmingly positive.

However, did the reorganisation and closures have positive effects upon how the children actually *performed academically*, rather than merely on how they and the adults *thought about* the process of reorganisation and closure? This is what we look at now.

Academic Outcomes

While the data from the stakeholders gives their own, necessarily subjective opinions as to whether reorganisation is positive or not, there is more objective evidence that looks at the same issue. This is the data routinely collected within

the educational system as to the quality of the academic 'outcomes' of children from schools *before* reorganisation and *after* that process.

There are two qualifications to apply to the data we have here. Firstly, we were unable to obtain performance data for Powys schools, so our calculations can only be based upon one authority, Pembrokeshire. Secondly, we had hoped that we could look at a full range of performance data from each school, covering attendance rate, and indeed data on a 'micro' level such as the teacher and pupil absence rates. However, we were unable to obtain this routinely for all schools since it was collected many years ago.

Because of the time between the merger of the schools and the present research we did not have the ideal time-series data that would have looked at how schools were performing *before* and *after* reorganisation, which would have been on reading tests or the like. Our data is therefore limited to only one objective measure of change – the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) results for our schools over the years prior to, and after, reorganisation by comparison with that of the Pembrokeshire schools as a whole.

We looked at the experience of the three schools in two groups: The first were the two schools that shut in 2001 and which had their first pupils sitting SATs in 2002. The second was the one school which shut in 2004 and had its first pupils doing SATs in 2005. In both cases we compared the last year of SATs results from the 'old' schools with the most recent data we have, for 2006. In the case of the two schools entering pupils from 2002, we have four successive years to examine. In the case of the one entering pupils from 2005, we have one year of possible change.

In both cases we obtained the average SATs results for the authority for all its schools (including our three schools) to compare with changes over time. In both cases, we used the results of individual children as our measure.

For the two '2002-2006' schools, their pupils in Year Six who sat the SATs averaged 48 per cent in the Core Subject Indicator (CSI) in 2002, increasing by 9 per cent to 57 per cent by 2006. Pembrokeshire as a whole, increased by somewhat less, rising from 73 per cent to 78 per cent for all its children over the same period.

These data are added to by the data from the school where there have only been two years to see any change. In this school, in 2004 the feeder schools obtained 69 per cent of their pupils with the CSI, with this rising to 83 per cent in the two years after 2004, up to 2006. The Pembrokeshire average went up from 74 per cent to 78 per cent in these years, an increase of 4 per cent compared with 14 per cent for our school.

We should be honest and note that there was variation between the two schools that were in the '2002-2006' group, with one rapidly improving over time and one smaller school declining somewhat, although the overall experience of the *group* of children was very positive.

One can express these results as follows – utilising the *school* level of analysis, two out of the three schools show improvement considerably greater than that

of the county as a whole. Seen from the *group level of all our children's experience*, the overall change for them across the three schools was overwhelmingly positive by comparison with their age peers in non reorganised schools.

Of course, there are issues with our interpretation of the data. These include the small numbers in our sample, the possible effect of any absence of a small number of pupils from assessment, the effect of 'noise' in the data on our results and the general problems of errors, omissions and bias that are present in all use of statistics.

Nonetheless, it is clear that apocalyptic predictions about the impact of small school closures on the Welsh language and on communities are not borne out by our sample. On the Welsh language, no parent or child thought the position of the language was worse after reorganisation. This is an extraordinary finding given the public debate on this issue.

In one of the schools, provision of Welsh medium education rose from none in the feeder schools to 50:50 provision in the reorganised school after a few years. Moreover, this filtered into the wider community as parents learned the language as well. And on the impact on the community, the great majority of respondents reported an improvement. Again, this is an extraordinary finding given the nature of the public discussion around the issue. In general, communities were seen as larger as a result of the change, but all the more stronger for that.

The performance data join with the questionnaire responses from adults and children across the two authorities to suggest that school closure is a positive process. Overall the experience and results are overwhelmingly favourable.

Chapter Four

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This report began by describing the controversies that policies for small school closures have generated across rural Wales. They are, indeed, a well ploughed field of debate, with diverse views strongly held. We then examined the existing research base about the effects of school size, which is mostly restricted to studies of secondary schools and to studies undertaken *at a point in time*. Moreover, this research base overwhelmingly relates to large schools rather than the small schools that are overwhelmingly the subject of debates over size in Wales

In the hands-on research undertaken for this project we studied the experience of six schools in Pembrokeshire and Powys *over time*, interviewing participants about their views and collecting some limited performance data. The results were overwhelmingly positive as to the benefits of the closures we examined, although there was some variation between the experiences of the groups we studied. Importantly, in the key areas of the Welsh language and impact on the local communities, we found little support for those who fear the destructive effects of closure. Indeed, not a single adult or child (out of 48) thought that the Welsh language's situation had worsened since closure.

It is important to underline that, contrary to these findings, the portrayal of school closures within Wales over the past decade has been overwhelmingly negative. Why is this? At least three reasons can be put forward:

1. Parent groups and others opposed to closure invariably use the media to report their views to bring pressure to bear on local educational authorities that support closure. The media will report the cat up the tree, not the thousands on the ground. The media need and consume news. Parent groups have learned that they can get high levels of exposure for their views. What is unclear, however, perhaps because it is rarely if ever expressed, is what *all* parents feel about closure and reorganisation. Moreover it is rarely, if ever, reported what children – the forgotten actors and actresses in this drama – feel about closure.

2. When a closure programme is announced, it is inevitable that people first see what they are about to lose. It is much more difficult to demonstrate what they might gain. Certainly, the media does not articulate that. Film and photographs of village schools and protesting parents are never balanced with shots of the new buildings pupils and parents will be using in the future.

3. Opposition campaigns to school closures may also reflect aspects of Welsh culture and traditions. Put simply, we may posses an idealised view of our rural past. This may lead us to be over anxious to hold on to what remains of the past, even though that may involve a 100-year-old school which is now unfit for purpose. In theory at any rate, rural life promises 'belonging', a secure identity and the close mesh of community life that should protect and succour us.

The belief that the school can help us hold on to our revered past, and of course the views of those parents and others who have moved into rural areas precisely for that reason, have been extremely powerful in Wales. However, we need to consider the future of our children, as well as trying to preserve our collective past.

There are many examples within Wales of strong, vital, connected communities that have no local school at all. It is the people, not a school building, who surely create a community. Certainly, our sample thought that their communities were better following a school closure than before it. Of course, the nature of their new community was different from that of the old.

A further difficulty with school closures in Wales is that we have been extraordinarily insular in our thinking about them. By English standards and those of most other industrialised societies, our primary schools are *extremely* small. In general, and by all international standards, they remain *very* small even after reorganisation. In the Welsh context, reorganisation means that schools retain a close connection with their communities at the same time as releasing scarce resources to benefit the school system as a whole.

Another problem with the school closure debate in Wales is that it has tended towards seeing, or perhaps imagining, schools as families rather than educational institutions. Certainly, parents are right to want their schools to reflect the best principles and practices of family life. However, schools also exist to broaden children's knowledge, attributes and skills so that they do not have a restricted repertoire to draw on that comes solely from their families. The society that children will be entering as teenagers or young adults is diverse, varied, larger and more impersonal than their families. It offers more choice, more chance for self expression and self determination. Consequently, our schools need to see their role as a bridge with the family that works to initiate young people into society. It is noticeable from our data that the majority of children preferred their new, larger school environments, rather than their old settings. Perhaps we should listen to their views.

Moreover, the terms of the school closure debate in Wales have typically celebrated 'the small' without understanding the advantages of 'the larger'. In stating this it is right to acknowledge the strong strains that have advocated 'smallness' within Welsh political thinking. Indeed, Wales has historically seen many settlements, villages, communes and the like that have tried to retain the human scale, as they would see it, by remaining small. The small schools movement of committed parents and educationalists has strong Welsh roots, and influence.

However, in the area of education, 'bigger' can also be beautiful. Larger sizes for schools provides efficiencies of scale, a critical mass of resources that enables 'one off' expenditures of scale that would not be possible in smaller settings. It also provides the chance of specialisation for teachers, rather than their trying to be an expert in all areas as is the case in the setting of very small schools.

Specialist areas of provision – for Welsh and Special Educational Needs for example – can be developed better when there are larger numbers than smaller. Then the 'critical mass' of children in the various educational 'need' categories are on a scale where something can be done about them. The larger scale may have been seen as something of an enemy of humanity within Wales, but it may also prove to be a friend for the development of our children.

Given that the reorganisations and closures we examined were overwhelmingly supported by those involved that we interviewed, and also by our limited performance data, and given that the process releases more resources for all, then there seems to be no rational or logical reasons against them – although, of course, there may be less than rational ones.

Recommendations

When small school closures take place – and it seems inevitable that they will at an increasing pace across rural Wales – there are a number of ways in which the process could be improved. The following recommendations arise largely in response to the interviews carried out in this study:

1. The needs of children – not their parents, communities or any other interests – should be considered above all others. In public discussions, media debate and general discourse on this issue, whether the educational interests of children are being served must become the acid test of closure plans, and crucially of any opposition to those plans.

2. Directors of Education contemplating closure or amalgamation should 'scope' what has been done in this area nationally and internationally, to see where the process has been carried forward successfully and where unsuccessfully, and benchmark themselves against best practice.

3. The Welsh Assembly Government is entitled as it does to argue that education is delivered through 22 councils, who themselves are encouraged to reflect their varied community contexts. Yet policy variation seems to be unduly large within Wales and to owe as much to chance as it does to purposive local decisions. The Assembly Government should put in place national guidelines as to how the process should be undertaken, and identify best practice. The aim should be to provide an adequate level of debate and decision-making, based on rational decision-making, across the whole of Wales. There should be no 'postcode lottery' in school closures.

4. The consultation process between the Local education authority, governing bodies and parents needs to be of high quality. Contact needs to be consistent and frequent to allay fears. Concerns raised need to be listened to, acknowledged and addressed. Good planning and a clear vision of the outcome are required. There should be honesty and truthfulness from the local authority from the beginning of the process, and it needs to be sensitive to the needs of the children, parents, teaching staff and communities involved. The children and parents need to have a clear understanding of what is happening. There should be no hidden agenda. The process should be completely open and on the table. Joint ownership is essential, within an educational culture of 'open-ness' to new thinking and new ideas.

5. Local authorities should shorten the time period from when reorganisations are mooted to the decision being announced, whether positive or negative, to avoid school closure blight.

6. Schools facing the prospect of closure should be given the opportunity to see what has been done in schools and areas that have successfully gone through this process. This could involve visits to newly and successfully amalgamated, sometimes purpose-built, schools. This will demonstrate how children benefit from rationalised resources such as better facilities, buildings and opportunities. This could be done by showing a film (thereby reducing disruption due to repetitive visits) or by virtual reality software. When faced with closure proposals people can easily focus on what they are about to lose. Unless they are shown it, they mostly cannot see what they are about to gain.

7. The size of new, reorganised schools should be capped. Retaining a 'small school' feeling for young children has a nurturing effect and helps with their sense of security whilst ensuring they are able to mix with many children of their own age and understand the needs of others. Keeping the 'small school' feeling within schools that will be larger is essential.

8. Proper (clean and dry) storage facilities should be arranged and supplied for use during a move so that nothing is damaged, lost or destroyed, and the past can live on in the physical presence of the new school rather than being destroyed.

9. Sufficient time as well as physical help needs to be provided to assist teachers and Head teachers during a move so that teaching time is not lost.

10. New school buildings should be ready prior to a move. Building work should not continue after the children have moved into the school, since there would be considerable dust (a health hazard) and noise (impairing both teaching and learning).

11. There must be care for the educational professionals involved in an amalgamation. Any teaching Head teacher should be temporarily released for an appropriate number of days from teaching duties to supervise the

move into a new school. There should be no compulsory redundancies, only early retirement if desired.

12. When they do close a small rural village school, local authorities should donate the buildings for the benefit of the local community and the children. This means that when the communities' children come home at the end of the school day they can be taken to the playground of their old, closed school to meet and play and enjoy each others company, and parents can enjoy meeting and 'catching up' as they did at the school gate when the school was open. The sound of children playing together is often missed when small schools close, which can impoverish the emotional tone of communities.

13. The 'new' schools should show consideration to the elderly populations in the feeder communities where small schools have closed, and provide lifts or a minibus to bring these people to school events such as concerts and Christmas plays. Elderly people were widely seen as missing these opportunities of community participation in the communities where schools have already closed.

14. Any savings generated by closure and reorganisation should be 'ring fenced' and remain within the scope of the overall Education budget, so parents and others will be able to see a direct link between what may be a difficult local process and county wide improvement in funding.

15. Reorganisation should be supported by appropriate capital expenditures on the new schools, supported if necessary by capital spending out of revenues, to ensure that new facilities are optimised. There must be no reorganisation 'on the cheap'.

16. Crucially, those who are reorganising schools must be more mindful than hitherto of the intensely political nature of these issues. Coalitions of support must be organised. They cannot be assumed. Credibility must be built. Success must be publicised. Political representatives must be involved from their local 'patches' if they are affected. There is a strong case to be made for reorganisation: the making of the case needs to be strong as well.

Our final comment is that there should be more research on the impact of small school closure. That we have had to wait forty years for this research, funded by an English charitable Foundation and organised by a think-tank with limited resources, is simply extraordinary given that it is viewed as perhaps the major, contemporary, distinctively Welsh issue in education.

The Welsh Assembly Government should commission large scale, multi-site studies of closure as it happens in the next few years, so that we can all see if our ideas in this necessarily small scale study are valid. The research reported here should only be the beginning, not the end, of the attempt in Wales to understand ourselves and our schools better.

Appendix One

Questionnaires Used

Interview for Head teachers

1. Please could you outline your own educational achievements and experience over the last five years? (your jobs, your roles, things you have tried to do)

2. What would you say is your own educational philosophy? (progressive/traditional)

3. Could you take me through the amalgamation of this school with the others? Can you detail what happened?

   - How well was the amalgamation handled with the schools merging into this one?
   - Was there opposition to it?
   - If so, from whom?
   - Did the community become involved in the opposition?
   - If so, how?
   - With what result?
   - What was the attitude of the heads from the closing schools?
   - What was the attitude of the teachers from the closing schools?
   - What was the attitude of the teachers from your school?
   - What was the attitude of the parents from the closing schools?
   - What was the attitude of the parents from your school?
   - What was the attitude of the children from the closing schools?
   - What was the attitude of the children from your school?

4. What do you think have been the results of the amalgamation in the following areas?

   - the effectiveness (quality) of education given
   - the efficiency (such as finance, and cost per head) of education given
   - educational standards academically (SATs results)
   - educational standards socially (happiness, self worth)
   - the Welsh language
   - the community
   - travel times to and from school

5. Specifically, what do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of the children coming into this school?

6. What do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of teachers coming into this school?

7. Has there been any change in attitude to the amalgamation since it has happened from activists, councillors, local authority officials, children, parents and/or teachers?

8. What in your opinion (as the person most involved in this process) are the disadvantages of the amalgamation?

9. What in your opinion (as the person most involved in this process) are the advantages of the amalgamation?

10. What do you think are the lessons to be learned that could help others who may have to go through this process in the future? Do you think anything could have been done better?

11. Have your own views about closing small rural schools changed as a result of your experience?

Interview for School Governors

1. Please could you outline your own educational experience over the last five years?   (your jobs, your roles, things you have tried to do)

2. What would you say is your own educational philosophy? (progressive/traditional)

3. Please could you take me through the amalgamation of this school with the others? Can you detail what happened?

   • How well was the amalgamation handled with the schools merging into this one?
   • Was there opposition to it?
   • If so, from whom?
   • Did the community become involved in the opposition?
   • If so, how?
   • With what result?
   • What was the attitude of the heads from the closing schools?
   • What was the attitude of the teachers from the closing schools?
   • What was the attitude of the teachers from this school?
   • What was the attitude of the parents from the closing schools?
   • What was the attitude of the parents from this school?
   • What was the attitude of the children from the closing schools?
   • What was the attitude of the children from this school?

4. What do you think have been the results of the amalgamation in the following areas?

   • the effectiveness (quality) of education given

- the efficiency (such as finance, and cost per head) of education given
- educational standards academically (SATs results)
- educational standards socially (happiness, self worth)

- the Welsh language
- the community
- travel times to and from school

5. Specifically, what do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of the children coming into this school?

6. What do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of teachers coming into this school?

7. Has there been any change in attitude to the amalgamation since it has happened from activists, councillors, local authority officials, governors, children, parents and/or teachers?

8. What in your opinion are the disadvantages of the amalgamation?

9. What in your opinion are the advantages of the amalgamation?

10. What do you think are the lessons to be learned that could help others who may have to go through this process in the future? (Do you think anything could have been done better?)

11. Have your own views about closing small rural schools changed as a result of your experience?

Interview for Teachers

1. Please could you outline your own educational achievements and experience over the last five years? (your jobs, your roles, things you have tried to do)

2. What would you say is your own educational philosophy? (progressive/traditional)

3. Please could you take me through the amalgamation of this school with the others? Can you detail what happened?

- How well was the amalgamation handled with the schools merging into this one?
- Was there opposition to it?
- If so, from whom?
- Did the community become involved in the opposition?
- If so, how?
- With what result?
- What was the attitude of the heads from the closing schools?

- What was the attitude of the teachers from the closing schools?
- What was the attitude of the teachers from this school?
- What was the attitude of the parents from the closing schools?
- What was the attitude of the parents from this school?
- What was the attitude of the children from the closing schools?

- What was the attitude of the children from this school?

4. What do you think have been the results of the amalgamation in the following areas?

- the effectiveness (quality) of education given
- the efficiency (finance, cost per head etc.) of education given
- educational standards academically (SAT'S results)
- educational standards socially (happiness, self worth)
- the Welsh language
- the community
- travel times to and from school

5. Specifically, what do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of the children coming into this school?

6. What do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of teachers coming into this school?

7. Has there been any change in attitude to the amalgamation since it has happened from activists, councillors, local authority officials, governors, children, parents and/or teachers?

8. What in your opinion are the disadvantages of the amalgamation?

9. What in your opinion are the advantages of the amalgamation?

10. What do you think are the lessons to be learned that could help others who may have to go through this process in the future? Do you think anything could have been done better?

11. Have your own views about closing small rural schools changed as a result of your experience?

Interview for Parents

1. How has the experience of school closure/amalgamation affected your child/children?

2. Has this experience had any effect on you as a parent?

3. Please could you take me through the amalgamation of this school with the others? Can you detail what happened?

- How well was the amalgamation handled with the schools merging into this one?
- Was there opposition to it?
- If so, from whom?
- Did the community become involved in the opposition?
- If so, how?
- With what result?
- What was the attitude of the heads from the closing schools?
- What was the attitude of the teachers from the closing schools?
- What was the attitude of the teachers from this school?
- What was the attitude of the parents from the closing schools?
- What was the attitude of the parents from this school?
- What was the attitude of the children from the closing schools?
- What was the attitude of the children from this school?

4. What do you think have been the results of the amalgamation in the following areas?

  - the effectiveness (quality) of education given
  - the efficiency (finance, cost per head etc.) of education given
  - educational standards academically (SAT'S results)
  - educational standards socially (happiness, self worth)
  - the Welsh language
  - the community
  - travel times to and from school

5. Specifically, what do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of the children coming into this school?

6. What do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of teachers coming into this school?

7. Has there been any change in attitude to the amalgamation since it has happened from activists, councillors, local authority officials, governors, children, parents and/or teachers?

8. What in your opinion are the disadvantages of the amalgamation?

9. What in your opinion are the advantages of the amalgamation?

10. What do you think are the lessons to be learned that could help others who may have to go through this process in the future? Do you think anything could have been done better?

11. Have your own views about closing small rural schools changed as a result of your experience?

Interview for Children (coming into the school from those closing)

1. What was your old school like?

2. What was it like to come to this school from the other one?

3. Do you like this school more or less?

4. Do you get on with the new teachers in this school as well as the teachers from your old school?

5. Do you try as hard in the lessons now as you did before?

6. Are you as happy now as you were before?

7. Do you get on with the new children?

8. Do you speak Welsh as much as before?

9. Do you have more things to do now than before? (sports, clubs, choir)

Interview for Children (from the receiving school)

1. What was this school like **before** all the other children from the other schools came here?

2. What was it like when all the other children came here?

3. Did you like it more or less after they came to this school?

4. Do you get on with the new teachers as well as the teachers already at this school?

5. Do you try as hard in the lessons now as you did before?

6. Are you as happy now as you were before?

7. Do you get on with the new children?

8. Do you speak Welsh as much as before?

9. Do you have more things to do now than before? (sports, clubs, choir)

Councillors and Others

These groups were contacted by email and by letter and asked similar questions to those on the Head teacher questionnaire.

Appendix Two

Questionnaire Results

Pembrokeshire Results

Questions 1 and 2 were introductory questions. Question 3 was about the background to each school.

Question 4. What do you think have been the results of the amalgamation in the following areas?

a) the effectiveness (quality) of education given

improved	20
same	0
worse	0
unsure	1

b) the efficiency (finance, cost per head etc.) of education given

improved	17
same	0
worse	0
unsure	4

c) educational standards academically (SATs results)

improved	16
same	2
worse	0
unsure	3

d) educational standards socially (happiness, self worth)

improved	20
same	2
worse	0
unsure	1

e) the Welsh language

improved	13
same	7
worse	0
unsure	1

f) the community

improved	11
same	4
worse	1
unsure	5

g) travel times to and from school

increased	10
same	10
less	0
unsure	1

5. Specifically, what do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of the children coming into this school?
These are the responses that were given - some people gave more than three effects.

Larger school community – more peers own age 10
More and better facilities 8
More educational opportunities 7
Raising educational standards/ teaching quality 6
New building – more space – has a positive effect 5
More opportunities to play team sports 5
More competition in classroom situations 4
More confidence moving up to secondary education 3
Continuity of the children's education – seamless transition 3
More opportunities to socialise and integrate with wider range of children 3
More teachers/one teacher per age cohort 3
Able to participate in larger groups e.g. teams and Urdd activities (choirs etc.). 2
Confidence building 2
New approaches all the time 2
Better science teaching 2
More effective educational establishment 1
The children identify with a single establishment 1
More friends 1

Special needs are catered for better 1
The school fights for my son's needs to be met 1

Curriculum continuity 1
Transformed experience of Art and Music classes 1
Teaches children to respect something new 1
Teaches children not to be afraid of change 1
Child is not with the same teacher for 4 years 1

6. What do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of teachers coming into this school? Some people gave more than three effects.

Better space, equipment, facilities, fields, playground etc 8
None 7
Single curriculum responsibility 6
Teachers nurture each other/better professional development 6
Teamwork 5
More colleagues 4
Teacher expertise greater/better teaching 3
Better morale 2
Able to work in areas that interest us as teachers 2
Pleasant working environment 2
Inside toilets 2
Sharing of information regarding a particular child improved 1
Continuity of curriculum 1
Delivering a shared vision 1
Better efficiency 1
Able to go on more courses 1
Good leadership from Head teacher 1
Reduced paperwork – more time for teaching 1
Easier to teach one age group 1
Being part of a forward looking educational development 1

7. Has there been any change in attitude to the amalgamation since it has happened from activists, councillors, local authority officials, children, parents and/or teachers?

Happier situation	21
Worse situation	0
No change	0
Unsure	0

8. What in your opinion are the disadvantages of the amalgamation?

None 14
Practicalities of the move into new building 2
Classes became slightly bigger 2
Too few children came into the school to give an extra teacher 1

Disruption due to excessive noise and dust (building not ready in time for the amalgamation) 1
Swimming provision used to be for the whole school, now only the older children go swimming 1
All female staff worried parents of boys – lack of male influence in the school 1
Negative effect on the village where the school closed 1
Increased journey time to school 1
Less parental contact with teachers, there was daily contact, but parents have to make an appointment now to see a teacher 1

9. What in your opinion are the advantages of the amalgamation?

Brand new building with everything under one roof 9
Better facilities 7
Teachers working together – more teamwork 6
More opportunities 6
More space 5
Staff morale vastly improved 4
Having a staff room – didn't have one before/new staff room 4
Improved professional support/development 3
Bigger opportunities to socialise and integrate with a wider range of children 3
Team sports 3
We have experts in every area of the curriculum and sometimes two or three experts in each area 3
The children move to secondary education with increased confidence 3
Better working environment (clean, healthier, more space) 3
The new school is a lovely school/being proud of the new school 2
Children compete more to do well 2
Inside toilets 2
Choirs 2
Raising standards 2
Better quality teaching 2
Children not having to constantly put on/take off coats to move between buildings 1
More peers 1
School redeveloped completely 1
The school is already making a mark in the community and in Wales 1
Children have more friends 1
Children have more choice 1
More extra curricular activities 1
Teaching one age group 1
Easier to teach the curriculum with more teachers 1
Teachers able to train re dyslexia/autism etc 1
More integration and more time to specialise 1
Better and wider range of resources (educational, cultural, teaching and school) 1
The school will now attract a better calibre of teacher 1

People working here work towards a shared vision 1
We are able to address our own particular needs 1
Pastoral care is greatly improved 1
There is no counter argument: 12 teachers are better than 4 1
Fear removed from children going from Year Two to Year Three 1
Children socialise with different age groups 1
Prepares them more for life – mixing with people from different backgrounds 1
Children communicate more 1
Sense of belonging 1
Better education 1
Curriculum continuity 1
Sharing of information re a particular child is improved 1
Excellent Head teacher 1
We are always kept up to date with things 1
Better access to everything 1
The children are happy 1

10. What do you think are the lessons to be learned that could help others who may have to go through this process in the future? Do you think anything could have been done better?

Keep everyone well informed 7
Teachers needed more time and practical (physical) help with the move 5
Open door policy for questions 3
New building should be ready before moving in 3
Make the process quicker 3
Consultation process needs to be improved 3
Good communication needed 2
Teaching time of Head teacher was encroached upon by the move 2
Head teacher should have been released from teaching duties until the move was complete 2
Bring parents and children together, prepare the children in both situations 2
Look at the bigger picture – the benefits to the child and the community 2
Hold plenty of meetings for staff, parents and governors 2
More emphasis should be placed on welcoming the incoming children to the new school e.g. their photos on a wall to welcome them 1
There should be no emotional blackmail 1
The LEA's attitude was very aggressive 1
Felt we'd been bulldozed, even though we knew we wanted it 1
Concentrate on the positives 1
Show people what they will gain 1
Presentations should be given to staff and governors to give them as much information as possible 1
Joint ownership is essential 1
There should be no hidden agenda, the process should be completely open and on the table 1

Good planning beforehand 1
Clear vision required 1
Be professional 1
Bring together the governing bodies 1
Virtual reality could be used to help the parents of prospective closing schools to visualise the positive changes 1
Photos and films of the schools that have been through this process could be used 1

11. Have your own views about closing small rural schools changed as a result of your experience?

More favourable	20
Less favourable	1
Unsure	0

Powys Results

Questions 1 and 2 were introductory questions. Question 3 was about the background to each school.

Question 4: What do you think have been the results of the amalgamation in the following areas?

a) the effectiveness (quality) of education given

improved	16
same	0
worse	2
unsure	1

b) the efficiency (finance, cost per head etc.) of education given

improved	15
same	0
worse	0
unsure	4

c) educational standards academically (SATs results)

improved	12
same	2
worse	2
unsure	3

d) educational standards socially (happiness, self worth)

improved	13
same	2
worse	1
unsure	3

e) the Welsh language

improved	12
same	6
worse	0
unsure	1

f) the community

improved	7
same	7
worse	4
unsure	1

g) travel times to and from school

increased	14
same	0
less	0
unsure	5

5. Specifically, what do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of the children coming into this school?
These are the responses that were given - some people gave more than three effects.

Larger pool of teachers – more expertise 10

More peers own age and sex 10
More opportunities 7
Better provision of national curriculum 5
Greater variety of children from mixed social backgrounds 5
Bilingual school now – better understanding of Welsh 4
More resources, equipment and facilities 4
Diversity 3
Team sports 2
Raising academic standards – more homework etc 2
More confidence moving on to secondary education1
Children adapted well to a structured timetable 1
Children became more organised 1
Achieving better 1
More experiences 1
Specific special needs access 1
Less individual attention 1
More friends 1
Choirs 1
New school building –modern with better use of space 1
Too many in a class 1
The chance to learn Welsh as a first language 1
Modern equipment 1

6. What do you think have been the three biggest effects on the educational lives of teachers coming into this school? (Some people gave more than three effects).

None 11
Teamwork 6
Professional development improved 6
Sharing of good practice 5
New school building – better working environment 3
More facilities, resources equipment etc 3
More space 2
More colleagues 2
Better curriculum coverage 1
Teachers work in partnership with English and Welsh streams – twinned classes in effect 1
Ability to specialise in their own interests 1
Having classes of pupils of the same age 1

7. Has there been any change in attitude to the amalgamation since it has happened from activists, councillors, local authority officials, children, parents and/or teachers?

Happier situation	16
Worse situation	0
No change	2
Unsure	1

8. What in your opinion are the disadvantages of the amalgamation?

Negative effects on a community where a school closed 7
None 6
Increased class sizes 3
Uprooting children from their own community 2
Increased travel times to school 2
Children unsure where their loyalties lie 1
Lack of respect and trust for LEA was formed 1
Too much trial and error 1
No prepared plan to follow 1

The sound of children playing and laughing is missed 1
The children were more connected to children of different ages 1
Less individual attention for the children 1

9. What in your opinion are the advantages of the amalgamation?

More peers 8
More teachers 6
More opportunities 6
More facilities, resources and equipment 5
Educational advantages for the children 5
Social development 4
Broader curriculum 4
New school building 4
Hear more Welsh and advantages to the Welsh language 4
Financially more efficient/effective 3
Team sports 3
Prepares children better for secondary education 3
More confidence 3
Children have more friends 3
Increased diversity 3
Children take a position in a larger school 2
More extra curricular activities 2
More space 2
Accepting school strengthened by increased numbers 2
More competition 1
Children are happier 1
More time to plan strategies, initiatives and piloting new ideas 1
More drama, music and sport 1
Teamwork 1
Interaction between people improved 1
Modern equipment 1

10. What do you think are the lessons to be learned that could help others who may have to go through this process in the future? Do you think anything could have been done better?

Look at the success stories 6

Better consultation and communication is needed 6
Don't delay closure – uncertainty is damaging 5
Better planning, organisation and liaison needed 5
County Councils need to learn how to engage with their communities 3
Council needs to understand the impact on people involved 3
Put the needs of the children first 3
Remove uncertainty 2
Visits should be arranged for everyone coming into new school 2
Don't procrastinate and give false hope 2
Be willing to move on 2
Looking back is no good 2
More information early on 1
Speak to people who have been through the process 1
Timescale is paramount – indecision is damaging (for years and years in some cases) 1
Honesty and truthfulness is required from LEA from the start 1
Parents need to be positive so children don't pick up on their anxieties 1
Unrealistic expectations and false promises were made 1
Give good news prior to bad 1
Show people what they will gain 1
The (new) school is already too small – more consideration should be given to any building that might be undertaken 1
Listen to people's views 1

11. Have your own views about closing small rural schools changed as a result of your experience?

More favourable	14
Less favourable	3
Unsure	2