

## EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: September 4, 1996

# How One Community Rejected the Monolithic High School

By Mark C. Carnes

[← Back to Story](#)



The finance gurus had it all figured out. A huge addition to Newburgh, N.Y.'s high school could accommodate higher enrollments, shift the 9th grade out of the congested junior highs, and expose students to the latest high-tech pedagogy. Idle contractors and construction unions would profit from the biggest project in years. Best of all, local taxpayers would foot only \$7 million of the \$26 million cost. Little wonder that the board of education endorsed the expansion and sent it to the New York State Department of Education for funding approval.

But a new board member, Sheila Kaplan Rubin, doubted the wisdom of increasing the school's capacity to 3,700, the largest in upstate New York. Fearing that such a school would be anonymous and unmanageable, she launched an 11th-hour petition drive against the expansion.

The board majority scoffed at the petition campaign. Pointless grandstanding, they called it. But in less than a month several thousand people had signed the petitions, more than usually turn out for the board elections. Sparked by the petition drive, a full-blown protest movement blazed forth: Protesters staged rallies and marches at board offices; ad hoc groups raised funds and organized mass mailings; leafleters blanketed the local malls and Little League fields.

The protests culminated in a public hearing with the board on Feb. 28 of this year. Several board members shifted their position, but a resolution to recall the plan from Albany fell one vote short. Further protests were pointless, the board majority insisted, because state approval was imminent. "It's a done deal," they declared.

Undaunted, the plan's opponents resolved to elect an anti-expansion slate in the May board election; and they lobbied local state legislators, all of whom were sympathetic to the anti-expansion cause, to pressure the governor and the state

**In Newburgh, local**

**Why do so many states allocate building aid in ways that encourage districts to continually expand schools?**

**opposition  
snowballed.**

education department to postpone approval of the plan until after the election.

Local opposition to the expansion snowballed, and attracted broader attention.

Diane Ravitch, a former assistant U.S. secretary of education, sent an open letter to the people of Newburgh advising them to oppose the "massification" of their high school.

Election day brought the biggest turnout--and the biggest landslide--ever. The four anti-expansion candidates swept, winning by a 3-to-1 ratio. The leader of the pro-expansion majority, despite a decade of creditable service on the board, suffered a crushing defeat.

The great irony was that even he had misgivings about the big high school. He supported the expansion because it ingeniously exploited complex state funding formulas. The proposal's chief--and perhaps only--beauty was that it would save local taxpayers \$6 million. A new, free-standing school, though equally costly, would receive far less state aid.

Why does New York state, and, in fact, many other states, allocate building aid in ways that encourage districts to continually expand schools?

The answer takes us back to Oct. 4, 1957, when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first artificial satellite. The powerful boosters that hurled Sputnik into space would soon be tipped with nuclear weapons; bomber-based air defenses instantly became obsolete, Newburgh's Stewart Field among them. American science had suffered its most humiliating and dangerous failure. James B. Conant, formerly president of Harvard University and head of the scientific effort behind the Manhattan Project, blamed the nation's high schools, especially the tiny rural schools where English teachers also held forth on science and math. In *The American High School Today* (1959), he called for the consolidation of such schools into units large enough to offer specialized instruction in math, science, and foreign languages. "Bigger is better," Mr. Conant insisted. His book sold 170,000 copies in five months, perhaps the most implausible best seller of the century.

Throughout the nation, state legislators rushed to embrace James Conant's agenda. They voted more money for education, and offered higher reimbursement rates for district consolidations and school expansions. All of these factors converged in Newburgh, N.Y., in the early 1960s. The Newburgh Enlarged City School District was formed by consolidating a number of urban, suburban, and rural districts. School officials took advantage of funding differentials to build the high school's first addition, crowned with a planetarium. It was to be a high school for the Space Age, exactly as Mr. Conant envisioned.

But in Newburgh, as elsewhere in the nation, something went wrong. If "big was better," no school could be too large, and after 1960 the size of the average school in the United States increased by 300 percent. Over 100,000 of the smaller schools were closed. Most high schools grew far beyond the range Mr. Conant thought optimal, and many inner city schools ballooned to over 3,000 students. Floundering in a sea of anonymity, students all too often sank from view. Vandalism and crime became commonplace. Test scores fell. As the big schools became plagued by behavior problems and declining scores, per-pupil costs rose. And just as problems became more intractable, administration became more unwieldy, for the large schools had erected a new tier of administrators, even more remote from students and teachers.

**If big was better,  
no school could be  
too large. And after  
1960, average  
school size  
increased by 300  
percent.**

Today educators understand that big high schools are usually bad, and almost always so in urban settings. This has been confirmed in recent years by scores of studies of school size and curricular offerings, academic achievement, and student behavior. This past March, the National Association of Secondary

School Principals, in "Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution," formally repudiated the Conant "big is better" doctrine. "High schools must break into units of no more than 600 students so that teachers and students can get to know each other better," the principals insisted. ("**Report Calls for Personal Touch In High School**," Feb. 28, 1996.)

But if the deficiencies of big high schools are apparent to scholars and principals, the political dimension of the issue has gone mostly unobserved. And this is why the campaign in Newburgh is important. During the past half-century, Newburgh, N.Y., has often been a battleground for racial confrontations, as pointed out in a famous CBS television "White Paper on Newburgh" in the 1950s and by an acrimonious desegregation fight in the 1970s. Yet the community came together to stop the construction of a huge high school. The protest rallies featured leaders of the Black Ministerial Association and of the parent-teacher organizations, senior citizens and students, conservatives and liberals, elitists and multiculturalists, the African-American Democratic mayor and the white, Republican town supervisors. The anti-expansion slate, consisting of two African-American men and two white women, all had nearly identical vote totals.

Why the unanimity?

My hunch is that voters recall, perhaps with pain, the unresponsiveness and impersonality of the 2,000-student high school they attended. They knew in their bones that, whatever the economics, it made no sense to nearly double the school's size.

What is true of Newburgh, N.Y., holds for the nation. Much of the electorate, baby boomers as well as Generation Xers, have similar misgivings about the large high schools they attended, schools that had been built during the post-Sputnik expansion craze. These people now constitute a deep reservoir of political clout which, as the Newburgh campaign shows, is waiting to be tapped.

Over the summer, the new board of education in Newburgh was sworn in. Its first item of business was to halt the expansion. My guess is that in the years to come, hundreds of communities will also cancel school-expansion plans, or avoid them altogether; and state legislators will reverse the funding formulas that gave rise to the huge schools in the first place. The big urban high school will become a painful reminder of the past, a hulking monument to the Cold War's grim exigencies.

---

Mark C. Carnes, a graduate of Newburgh (N.Y.) High School, is a professor of history at Barnard College, Columbia University, in New York City.

**WEB ONLY**