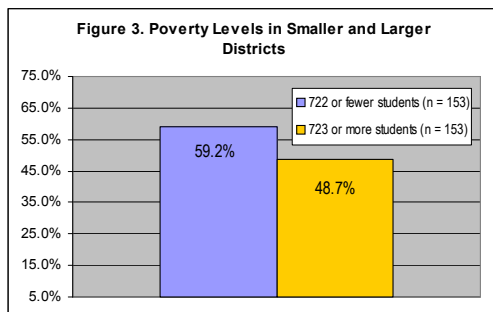


than in larger districts (see Figure 3). The difference is statistically significant.



In sum, smaller districts graduate more of their students while producing the same level of academic achievement, and they do so in spite of the fact that they contend with higher poverty levels.

### Conclusion

Small school advocates have long touted the intimacy and family atmosphere of their schools as an education benefit. This seems to be borne out by numerous national findings, among them a report in June of 2006 by *USA Today* that among the nation's five largest districts the graduation rates range from 54.6% to 68.1%, with a national average graduation rate of 69.6%.

One solution to keeping kids in school offered by researcher Daniel Losen of Harvard University is "personalization of high school—helping kids feel engaged and part of a community" ("Dropout rates high, but fixes under way," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 3, 2006).

Small schools are uniquely situated to successfully enact that solution, as evidenced by the fact that the smallest, poorest schools in Arkansas have by far the best graduation rates.

<sup>1</sup>Results from an independent samples T-test confirmed that the difference was statistically significant. The methodology used to calculate graduation rates for this report was based on the model developed by Jay Greene. The approach measures the number of high school graduates in a particular year (here, 2002-3, the most recent year of available data) as a percentage of the 8th grade cohort of four years earlier (here, 1998-9), with 8th grade enrollment adjusted to reflect changes in district enrollment. See Greene, J., (2001). *High school graduation rates in the United States*. NY: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. for a more detailed description of the formula. Sadly, a number of the smaller districts with highest graduation rates in the current report have been annexed or consolidated out of existence..

<sup>2</sup>  $r = -.233$ , significant at  $p < .001$



*Cultivating strong relationships between schools and communities*

# Arkansas' Small Schools

## Producing Higher Graduation Rates



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# Arkansas' Smaller School Districts Produce Better Graduation Rates

## Introduction

It's an education statistic Arkansas can be proud of: In a report by the National Center for Education Statistics on graduation rates, Arkansas ranked 21<sup>st</sup> among the fifty states in graduation rates in 2003, with 76.6% of students graduating from high school.

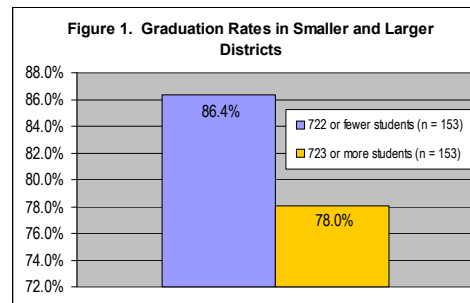
This compares favorably with a report by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which says that nationally almost one third of all public high school students fail to graduate with their class (*The Silent Epidemic*).

Ironically, when Dr. Jerry Johnson of the Rural School and Community Trust took a closer look at high school graduation rates in Arkansas for Advocates for Community and Rural Education, he found that Arkansas' graduation rates received a boost from the state's much maligned small school districts. In fact, the contrast between smaller district graduation rates and those of larger schools is so striking that it would not be exaggerating to say that those same small school districts that many state policymakers and education department officials have called inadequate and inefficient in recent years provide much of the basis for the state's above average performance in this area.

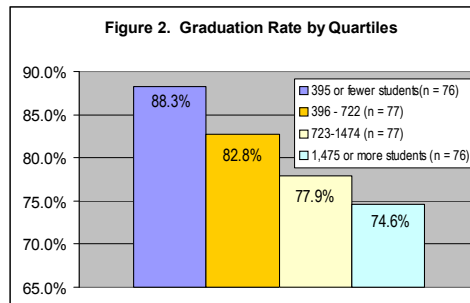
## Analysis

The analysis first compared the graduation rates<sup>1</sup> for larger school districts (those with a

student enrollment at or above the state median of 723) and smaller school districts (enrollment of 722 or less). Results indicated that the graduation rate in smaller districts was 11% higher than the graduation rate in larger districts (see Figure 1).



Next, school districts were divided into four equal groups, based on enrollment size. The quartile with the state's smallest school districts had the highest graduation rates, and the quartile with the next smallest districts had the next highest rates. The quartile with the state's largest districts had the lowest graduation rates, and the quartile with the next largest district had the next lowest rates (see Figure 2).



Bivariate correlation analysis was then used to directly measure the relationship between district enrollment and graduation rates. Results indicated a statistically significant negative relationship between district size and graduation rate, suggesting that for every enrollment increase of five students, the graduation rate declines by just over one percentage point.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, some might argue that higher graduation rates are the result of social promotion or lower academic standards. This possibility was tested by comparing achievement levels on end-of-course tests among districts with higher and lower graduation rates. Results from that analysis indicated that students in school districts with higher graduation rates performed at essentially the same level as students in districts with lower graduation rates on end-of-course tests in Algebra, Geometry, and Literacy (i.e., differences were nonsignificant).

Others might wonder whether differences in graduation rates among larger and smaller districts are related to differences in the levels of poverty in the two groups of school districts. Since poverty is a well-documented barrier to student achievement, districts with higher poverty rates might have lower graduation rates. This possibility was tested as well, with results indicating that the level of poverty in smaller districts was higher