

Part III:

Making Schools Larger

Chapter 7:

Expanding Catchment Areas

After considering all the social, economic and educational factors, authorities may decide that they prefer medium-sized or even large schools to small ones. In areas of sparse population and/or low enrolment, expansion of catchment areas (i.e. the areas from which schools draw their pupils) is one way to do this. This chapter discusses two mechanisms for expansion of catchment areas: (a) boarding, and (b) bussing.

(a) Boarding

Boarding schools may be found all over the world. Sometimes pupils are weekly boarders (normally going home each week-end). Alternatively they may be termly boarders (normally going home only at the end of term).

The main *advantages* of boarding schools are:

- * By drawing pupils from larger catchment areas, the schools can themselves become larger. They are then more easily able (a) to offer broad curricula, and (b) to achieve economies of scale.
- * They avoid children's daily travel, and thus its associated financial and physical costs.
- * They can enrol some children who otherwise would not be catered for at all, even with long daily journeys.

Day Schools or Boarding Schools? Experiences from Papua New Guinea

During the 1970s, the Papua New Guinean government tried to reduce education costs by insisting that all new secondary schools would be day ones. It calculated that buildings for day schools would cost only K150,000, compared to K1,000,000 for boarding ones. If per-pupil costs were reduced, secondary education could be spread to more people and more regions.

However, in rural areas the innovation worked poorly. Even in relatively densely populated places, many students found it hard to travel each day because there were few roads or buses. And students from remote areas found daily commuting quite impossible, on both practical and financial grounds.

To solve their problems, the students and their families built informal hostels near the schools. But the hostels were not supervised by the education authorities. Students often tried to bring food on Sundays to last the rest of the week, but found that vegetables went rotten. Also, the hostels were often crowded and insanitary, and girls felt vulnerable to unwanted attention.

These difficulties contributed to poor performance in examinations. Pupils in day secondary schools felt like second-class citizens.

Thus although the government was to be applauded for its aim to serve more people, its policy created hardship and qualitative problems. Three main lessons emerged:

- (a) Secondary schools in remote areas cannot be completely day schools unless they are very small, which implies high unit costs. In poor countries it may be better to have medium-sized schools, and to allow some pupils to board while others travel daily.*
- (b) It is dangerous for planners to look only at financial expenditure. Both qualitative and quantitative costs have to be matched against benefits.*
- (c) It is also dangerous for governments to look only at costs to themselves. If communities have to finance daily travel or self-help boarding facilities, the total financial burden may in fact be higher.*

- * Because children are in the schools' care for longer periods each day, the educational programmes can have a stronger impact. Also, it is easier to organise extra-curricular programmes.
- * Children may receive a better diet than they might get at home.
- * In order to promote national unity, some governments use boarding schools to encourage contact between children of different ethnic groups.

However, there are also several *disadvantages*:

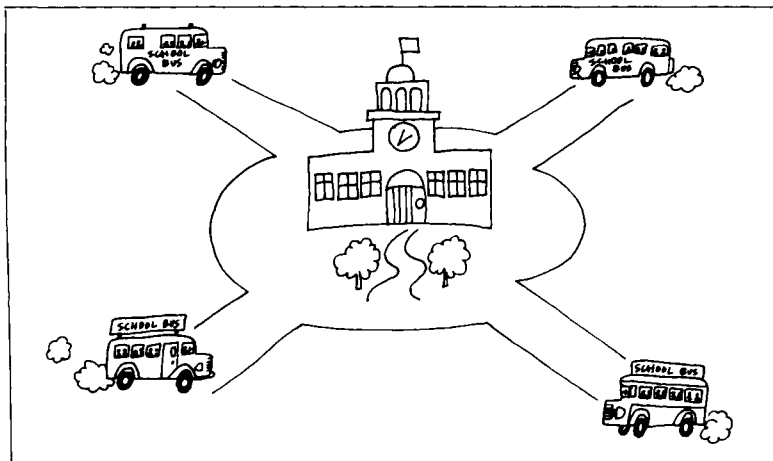
- * In addition to all the staffing and educational facilities of day schools, boarding schools have to provide dormitories, food and extra supervisory staff. They therefore have high unit costs.
- * The children are separated from their families. Many people consider this psychologically undesirable for young children. Also, removal of children's labour from the home can have economic implications.
- * It is harder for boarding schools to have close links with parents and communities. Because the parents are far away, they have less contact with the schools, and can less easily cooperate with the schools in educating the children.
- * Because a single large boarding school replaces several smaller day schools, communities are deprived of institutions which, as Chapter 1 pointed out, can provide major centres for social development.

Governments therefore have to weigh up these factors very carefully. Sometimes it is more desirable and even cheaper to have several small day schools than to have a single large boarding school.

(b) Bussing

In areas with good transport networks, it is possible for pupils to travel long daily distances by bus (or car, train or boat). It is then possible to have fairly large day-schools.

The chief *advantage* of this system is that it avoids the problems of boarding schools. The children return to their families every day; the staff do not have to look after the children after school hours; and the costs of accommodation etc. are saved.



A school can enrol more pupils if it has its own bus service.

The chief *disadvantages* are that:

- * daily travel can be very expensive — particularly (i) in areas with rough roads and high vehicle maintenance costs, and (ii) in countries where the salaries of drivers are high;
- * it may also be very tiring for the children; and
- * because the children have to leave school in time to get home reasonably early, it is hard for the school to organise extra-curricular activities.

Who Pays?

Some governments which favour this system meet all the costs of transport, while others require pupils' families to meet some or all the costs.

The first case, in which the government meets all the costs, is particularly common in the prosperous countries of Europe and North America.

- * Often, the government provides special school buses and drivers to take the children to school at the beginning of each day and to bring them home at the end. This can be easier to

justify if the buses and drivers serve other community purposes during the day.

- * Alternatively, the government allows parents to make their own arrangements and then repays expenses. For example, parents may use public transport or may group together to share the cost of a car.

But even when governments do not pay all costs, it is important for administrators to calculate them. First, they are costs to the nation, whoever pays them. Second, transport can place a heavy burden on poor families, and can destroy plans to promote equality.