

Classroom Overcrowding: It's Not Just a Numbers Game

By: Laura Preble



In my nearly 20 years teaching in my district, we've had several occasions to protest, trying to make our board of education sit up and take notice. One button read "Grossmont Students Lose With Class Size of 34 to One." It's black printing on a bright yellow button. I have it pinned to my bulletin board.

Now, I'd give almost anything to have 34 students in my classroom. This year, I have 40 in every single section (that's five sections...200 kids.) I'm sure one or two may drop eventually, but there's no way to know.

When I tell colleagues that I have 40 students per section, the first reaction is disbelief. Surely I've counted wrong? No, afraid not.

In my son's elementary school, things aren't much better. He is in third grade, and has 30 little souls in his classroom. Two teachers share the contract for his classroom, and they do an outstanding job. Still, handling 30 8-year-olds is a feat, and trying to teach them something? Well, miracles happen every day.

With this disturbing trend, schools, teachers and most importantly students are learning the devastating effects of overcrowded classrooms.

Losing Personal Connections with Students

I think the biggest problem when talking about classroom overcrowding is that things become a blur. Two hundred students is abstract; everyone knows it's a high number, but it doesn't mean anything. The problem is that each of those 200 children is someone's son or daughter; each has his or her own special needs (with or without special ed designation); each brings a host of other issues to the table every day. How can I possibly know them well enough to address all these issues?

Some may say that it's not my job to be a social worker or to know my students' lives. However, I know (and all teachers know) that teaching and learning is a personal business. It is not manufacturing. It's not even retail. When it works properly, it's closer to medicine than to any other field, I think. Teachers evaluate students' learning, check for weaknesses and strengths, and ideally prescribe the proper regimen to achieve optimal educational health.

It typically doesn't work like that in the overcrowded classroom. In my class, it's the sixth week of school and I still can't match a name to every face. I've always prided myself on knowing those names by week two. I know I'm not the only teacher feeling this way, and kids don't understand or care why you don't know their names: they just know that you don't know them. They feel insignificant, and rightly so.

Comparing Class Sizes

Only a few years ago, class size reduction was the educational buzzword. In a *New York Times* article from 2009, a graph comparing countries and their class sizes was mind-boggling. The country with the largest class size in 2009 — North Korea — clocked in at 36 kids per class. The United States was at 24. The lowest, the Russian Federation, was at about 17 kids per class.

In 1999, when class-size reduction was still viable, districts struggled to find temporary buildings to house smaller classes, with proportionately more teachers. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, nearly 40 percent of schools reported using temporary buildings to accommodate the smaller classes. The temporary bungalows often became permanent, but class sizes were still relatively manageable.

In *Quality Counts 2008*, the EPE (Educational project in Education) Research Center found that "21 states had a class-size reduction policy in place for the 2007-08 school year. By 2010, all but 15 states had laws restricting the number of students that may be included in a general education classroom, in some or all grades. Following the start of an economic downturn in 2008, 19 states relaxed or eliminated their class-size laws or policies, usually as a cost-saving measure." Today, most districts have squeezed as many kids as possible into classrooms, taking a toll on teachers and students alike.

Where we used to lack space, now we now lack seats within rooms. Kids sit on counters, on the floors, wherever they can find a space. Teachers struggle to be heard above the din of 40 plus kids, and kids struggle to hear the teacher and keep up with instruction. While we're racing to the top and leaving no child behind, we're burying them.

The Dangerous Results of Overcrowding

In educational research, this overcrowding is seen as the root cause for failed schools as well as teacher dissatisfaction.

- A University of London study from 2009 notes that teachers "feel there is a moral imperative operating at the heart of their work: Every child has the right to the attention and support which they need. This is difficult to attain under all circumstances and creates a tension for the teacher, which increases as class size grows."
- "Failure to achieve the ideal of meeting every pupil's needs produces negative feelings towards their own work," the London study goes on to note. "The size of the class contributes to the severe criticism which some teachers express about their own teaching. In a sense, once the class size passes a certain point, the teachers are bound to 'fail' because the demands on their time cannot be met."

Being teachers, we try to make it work, but at what cost? With larger classes, teachers are feeling more and more overwhelmed and burned out, and we run the risk of becoming ill or exhausted.

Overwhelmed teachers cannot meet the needs of their many students without sacrificing something of themselves. Although teachers have always given more than they're asked to give, there has to be a point where we stop saying yes and start saying "no more."

How do you feel about the effects of increasing class sizes? Share in the comments section!

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