

Reducing Class Sizes Across The City

Leonie Haimson has a lot to be proud of. What started 12 years ago as a casual conversation with her daughter Chloe's first-grade teacher has now become her passion, as well as her full-time job.

"I had never really given the issue of class size much thought until I was helping my daughter's teacher clean up before vacation one day," says Haimson. "She was a great teacher—very experienced, very skilled. And she told me that she prayed for the days when just one or two kids were absent because it just made all the difference. I was thunderstruck, and I thought, 'If she feels this way, how do other teachers who are less experienced and less skilled feel?'"

So she started doing research and found out that New York City had the largest class sizes in the state by far, and that smaller class sizes were strongly linked to better student success.

"I used to think, 'Well, it's New York City, we're doing the best we can, and we don't really know how to improve our schools,'" Haimson says. "But after doing this research, I realized we certainly aren't doing what we can. We know very well how to improve our schools, and we just don't do it."

That's when Haimson took action. She began organizing meetings with parent leaders in the city, some of which she held at her own house. She began working with Noreen Connell of the Education Priorities Panel (EPP). Eventually, Connell asked her to join EPP as a consultant on class size issues. Then, in 2000, Haimson formed Class Size Matters.

Class Size Matters (classsizematters.org) functions as a parent advocacy group that's dedicated to reducing class size in the New York City public schools. "We also provide information to parents, teachers, school board members, and other stakeholders throughout the nation about the research on the benefits of smaller class sizes," Haimson says. "In New York City we devote most of our time to advocacy work monitoring the class size situation, monitoring the spending on class size, and advocating for smaller classes in general."

Haimson co-chairs a task force on overcrowding in schools based out of the Manhattan Borough President's Office, and is now preparing a report on what the next school capital plan should look like. Haimson also works closely with state legislatures and city council members to make sure that New York City is spending the money that was invested in our schools to reduce class size. In addition, she maintains a list-serv with more than 3000 members and a New York City parent blog founded last year by Class Size Matters.

Although Haimson faces many challenges, she remains positive. As a mom of two, she is committed to the cause of giving the city's kids better learning opportunities.

"I'm proud that I helped contribute to the passage in 2007 of the state law that requires New York City to reduce class sizes in all grades, and I'm proud that I've helped raise public consciousness on this issue," she says. "I've done a lot, but certainly a lot more needs to happen."

—Krista Keyes



Leonie Haimson

Founder, Class Size Matters