



Class Size Matters
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Testimony to the NYC Council Education Committee on the impact of class size
reduction on teacher recruitment and retention
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Dear Chair Dromm and members of the NYC Council Education committee:

Thank you for holding these hearings today.

Most experts say the challenge of creating an effective, experienced teaching force especially in high-needs urban areas such as New York City derives more from high levels of teacher attrition than to the difficulty of recruitment. As Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania has written, "school staffing problems are rooted in the way schools are organized and the way the teaching occupation is treated ... lasting improvements in the quality and quantity of the teaching workforce will require improvements in the quality of the teaching job."¹

One of the most important determinants of the quality of the teaching profession is whether teachers feel as though they have a chance to be successful, and this in turn largely depends on their class sizes. Studies have linked small class sizes with a variety of cognitive and non-cognitive benefits for students and teachers, both short and long-term. Research shows that class size is an important factor in teachers' decisions to leave or stay in their jobs. Richard Ingersoll has noted that 54 percent of teachers who leave their school report that large class sizes contributed to their decision.²

According to a 2004 NYC Council survey of public school teachers, nearly a third (30%) of teachers with 1-5 years of experience said it was unlikely that they would be teaching in a NYC school in the next three years. For those teachers who were considering leaving, the top three changes in their work conditions that they said would most likely to persuade them to stay included higher pay, smaller classes, and better student discipline.³

¹ Ingersoll, Richard, (2003) Is There Really a Teacher Shortage? *Consortium for Policy Research in Education*
http://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_researchreports/37

² See Figure 15 at: Ingersoll, Richard M., (2015) "Why Schools Have Difficulty Staffing Their Classrooms with Qualified Teachers." *Consortium for Policy Research in Education*, <http://blueribbon.sd.gov/docs/Ingersoll%20Presentation819.pdf>

³ NYC Council, (2004) *A Staff Report of the NYC Council Investigation Division on Teacher Attrition and Retention*.
<http://www.nyc.gov/html/records/pdf/govpub/1024teachersal.pdf>

Of course, teacher pay has been increased substantially since 2007; yet at the same time, class sizes have also increased sharply. As for student discipline, many studies demonstrate that disruptive behavior also diminishes significantly when class sizes are smaller, because students are more engaged, can gain more positive feedback from their teachers and develop a more positive attitude towards their schools.

A review of 11 separate class size studies revealed the positive impact of smaller classes on students' behavior, resulting in decreases in disciplinary problems and increases in pro-social behavior, including positive interactions with teachers and other students.⁴

In a report released by the Educational Priorities Panel about the impact of the first year of the state's early grade class size program in 2000, both teachers and administrators described a huge improvement in student learning, but also in their behavior.⁵

One principal of a Harlem elementary school spoke about how suspensions at her school had fallen 60 percent from the previous year, which she attributed to smaller classes. Another principal observed: "Management is easier...There are fewer discipline problems because [student] needs are being met in the classroom. They're not acting out as much; there's been a turnaround in their behavior. For the first time, we have time to invest in the whole child, and relate to the child on all levels."

As a Brooklyn teacher explained, "If you have a child with a disciplinary problem, you can get on top of it faster ...you can re-channel children's attention towards a different avenue and get them to refocus their energies on the work, instead of acting out." As another teacher put it, students "look at each other more as family, and they connect to each other."

Of course, as disciplinary problems are reduced, the time for learning is increased, which leads to further academic advances -- triggering a positive feedback. Teachers almost uniformly reported spending more time on teaching, and less on classroom management as class sizes are decreased.

In the EPP report, many NYC principals independently predicted that the improvement in teacher morale resulting from class size reduction would lead to less staff turnover at their schools. One teacher went as far as to say that she would not remain teaching in the New York City public school system if the program was discontinued: "Now that I've seen the difference a small class makes, I don't want to go back to being a policeman. It would be impossible for me to go back to the old way. If the program disappeared, I'd go elsewhere -- I wouldn't keep teaching in a city public school, I'd teach where classes are smaller. Whatever money I was offered, it's just not worth it."

One of the arguments frequently made by opponents of class size reduction is that it could lead to an influx of unqualified, inexperienced teachers, particularly in schools that were already hard-to-staff. None of the principals mentioned this as a problem. Instead, one interviewed for this report said that it was much easier to

⁴ Finn, Jeremy D., Susan B. Gerber and Jayne Boyd-Zaharias, (2005). "Small Classes in the Early Grades, Academic Achievement, and Graduating from High School," *Journal of Educational Psychology*.
www.sfu.ca/~jcnesebit/EDUC220/ThinkPaper/FinnPanno2003.pdf

⁵ Haimson, Leonie, (2000) Smaller is Better: First-hand Reports of Early Grade Class Size Reduction in New York City Public Schools, *Educational Priorities Panel*. <http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/SmallerIsBetter.pdf>

fill the new openings she had, even among applicants who had already taken other jobs, because she could promise them smaller classes. Indeed, for the first time, she said, she could recruit more qualified candidates to teach in her school, including many with master’s degrees and greater experience.

Other studies have confirmed a significant relationship between class size, teacher morale and teacher retention. One study done in California concluded that large classes significantly increased teacher attrition rates.⁶ Another study analyzed data from New York districts outside NYC, and concluded that decreasing class size by three students per class significantly lowered teacher attrition.⁷

In a 2014 UFT survey, 99 percent of NYC teachers said reducing class size would be the most effective reform to improve student outcomes – far outstripping any other policy, including implementing socio-emotional learning, expanding universal preKindergarten, community schools, or college-ready standards.⁸ Thus reducing class size would likely significantly improve the retention of qualified, experienced teachers, since they would no longer leave the profession or depart to teach in suburban or private schools to experience success.

In the EPP report, one principal described the impact of smaller classes on her staff this way:

With my teachers, I was always concerned about burnout. I was a teacher myself and knew how difficult it was having 25 to 30 students ... In this school the staff turnover used to be tremendous; it was in part because they had so many kids, they were doomed to failure and no one wants to fail. Now, my teachers are happy. They are enjoying the art of teaching again. Sometimes, I felt like we were all on an assembly line. Now we can feel satisfaction, because we have results and can accomplish our goals.

For more studies showing the benefits of class size reduction in improving learning, socio-emotional development, attendance, discipline, school climate, parent engagement and narrowing the achievement gap, see www.classsizematters.org/research

⁶Loeb, Susanna, Linda Darling-Hammond and John Luczak, (2005), How Teaching Conditions Predict Teacher Turnover in California Schools. *Peabody Journal of Education* 80(3):44-70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3497042>

⁷ Pas Isenberg, Emily, (2010). “The Effect of Class Size on Teacher Attrition: Evidence from Class Size Reduction Policies in New York State.” *U.S. Bureau of the Census Center for Economic Studies*. Washington, DC. <https://www2.census.gov/ces/wp/2010/CES-WP-10-05.pdf>

⁸ Maisie McAdoo and Rhonda Rosenberg, (2014) What works, what doesn’t: Teachers speak their minds, *New York Teacher*. <http://www.uft.org/news-stories/what-works-what-doesn-t-teachers-speak-their-minds> . Ninety-one percent of respondents said class size reduction was a highly effective reform and another 8 percent rated it somewhat effective, for a total of 99 percent.