

Testimony
To the New York City Council Hearing on Class Size
Fri. Feb. 28, 2020
10 am

by Jessica Siegel

My name is Jessica Siegel. I recently retired as Associate Professor of Education, English at Journalism at Brooklyn College/CUNY after 18 years. Prior to that I taught English and journalism for 12 years at three New York City high schools. A large percentage of my work life has been committed to education, here in New York City, either as a teacher, a professor, (a teacher of teachers) or as a journalist writing about urban education.

I taught high school at three different schools: Seward Park High School on the Lower East Side, with a student population of over 3,500, Abraham Lincoln High School in Coney Island, which educates 1,750 students and the Heritage School in East Harlem, which serves 300 students. For decades, there was been a push for smaller schools, the idea being that teachers will be able to get to know their students well and in that way really improve teaching and learning.

And yet I can tell you from teaching at schools which ranged in size from 300 to 3,500, that the most important factor in student engagement and achievement is not school size but class size. Let me repeat that again: class size. Why should that be surprising? One of the first things that elite parents who can afford private schools look for in a school is teacher-student ratios. And obviously, this is even more important for the children who attend public schools who may speak another language at home, have parents who work two or three jobs or are homeless or are living in unstable situations.

At Brooklyn College, I taught pre-service and working middle school and high school English teachers how to teach writing in their classes. The reality is that there are few teachers with a wider range of responsibilities than those who teach English: from helping their students develop a love of reading, an array of critical reasoning skills, a sense of self-awareness and a knowledge of the larger world. They are also tasked to give their students an exposure to both the classics and modern multicultural literature, an understanding of literary genres and an appreciation of and excitement about literature and reading. But however long the list, it always ends with the exceedingly important responsibility of teaching their students to write. Despite talk among many about the need for writing across the curriculum--that all subject matters should integrate the teaching of writing--it is still the English teacher who is mostly responsible for the teaching of writing, for getting his/her students engaged with writing, enabling them to make writing work for them and commandeer its power.

It's my opinion after working in education for over 30 years that it is facility in writing and being able to write in a variety of forms, styles and purposes that is an important factor in determining whether a student can succeed in college and in a career after that. Every career requires writing of some sort and an ability to write is crucial in enabling students to transform their lives and to bridge the class chasm.

Yet according to the stats that Class Size Matters has collected, over 159,000 high school students are in English classes with more than 30 students. That is 47 percent of all high school students. Fifty-five percent of students in social studies classes, the other class where students do concentrated writing, are in classes of 30 or more.

Let's look at some more numbers: if an English teacher has 5 classes of 34 students a day, she is responsible for 170 students. (34 is the class size cap negotiated with the union 50 years ago.) All of us who are writers know that all writing is revising and that students really learn to write through revising their work. In fact, this is something you want to teach your students to do instinctively. You want your students to revise? Those 170 papers times are now multiplied by two or three. And during a semester, if students have three or four major assignments (and homework and smaller assignments), how many papers are their English teachers responsible for?

Over the last week or so, I emailed some of my former students who are now teaching to ask about how many students they currently teach and what it is like teaching them writing. One wonderful committed teacher who teaches at a junior high school in the Bronx said:

"My largest 8th grade class is a whopping 37 students. I teach two more classes, one with 32 and the last one with 28. Both include English Language Learners and students who require push in services for their Individualized Education Plans.

"The need for feedback for writing and reading intervention is very high. . . I tried to meet with students to assist them in their revisions. Not only was I just able to leave brief and hurried feedback on the original paper which took me over two weeks to read, but I could only devote about a minute or two to each student to explain how to implement the feedback. Even then it took days to get to each student. . . .

"I feel as though I'm being torn to shreds when I'm helping others, their eyes hungry and ready and yet there you are unable to reach them. It's as if you have one life raft and must choose which child gets saved. It's heart wrenching and demoralizing."

But more than that, at CUNY, where six out of 10 New York City public school students who go to college attend, 52 percent of community college students and 42

percent of senior college students are the first generation of their family to enroll in college, according to the Center for an Urban Future. And yet at New York City high schools, one school counselor serves an average of 221 students. At one in six schools, each counselor serves 300 or more students. Who is the key player in working with students around college applications—helping to shape college essays, writing recommendations, encouraging students to apply and where to apply—often the English teacher or perhaps the Social Studies teacher.

As a high school teacher, I taught the college essay, getting students to think through their influences of who and what made them who they are. It is both a writing assignment and a chance at this important juncture in their life to think through who they are to make their case to the colleges where they are applying. They wrote and revised and revised. And I don't know how many college recommendations I crafted semester after semester. It is part of what many, many English teachers do instinctively.

High school classes, at such a crucial time in young people's lives when they are engaging with intellectual challenges, thinking about where they will go next, grappling with personal issues, and learning to write—one of the most important skills they can leave high school with—should be small. If asked how small, I and many of my former students who are now English teachers in the New York City Schools, would say 15-20 students per class. It's taken for granted in private schools, where students get so much more preparation and support for their writing and for college at home.

I recognize that the funding that the City Council and the Mayor are discussing: \$100 million would only pay to hire 1,000 new teachers. That's not going to bring down class sizes in every high school English class nor am I arguing to hire high school English teachers rather than kindergarten or elementary school teachers or math and science high school teachers. But certainly it is a start. The ability to write is a powerful weapon to give our high school students as they move along in their lives.

I would like to quote two writers who I have taught often in my classes and who have much to say about the power of writing.

Mike Rose's book *Lives on the Boundary*, about his own struggles in school as a son of two working class Italian immigrants with elementary school educations helped my students get inside the heads of students who find school a rough row to hoe:

“I was struggling to express increasingly complex ideas, and I couldn't get the language straight. Words....piled up like cars in a serial wreck. I was encountering a new language—the language of the academy—and was trying to find my way around it.”

Edwidge Danticat, the Haitian-American writer, grew up in Flatbush, went to public schools, then to Barnard and Brown and on to being one of the most respected writers of her generation.

“Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your works may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them.... Somewhere, if not now, then maybe years in the future, we may also save someone’s life (or mind) because they have given us a passport, making us honorary citizens of their culture.”