

CLASS SIZE BACKGROUND

There have been decades of debate and much research on the effects of class size on student learning; however most educators and researchers agree that class size matters. A number of Canadian and international studies have shown that smaller class size has a strong impact on student achievement and narrows the achievement gap for those with specialized needs. (See 'Class Size Matters' below.) Detractors point to some studies that may have shown different results because of the way the studies measured success.

Schools and education have changed drastically in Canada. Inclusion policies have brought more diverse learners into the public education system. Classrooms today are large and increasingly complex. These are realities that government policies have not taken into account.

“The education system we currently see in our publicly-funded schools is the product of the Industrial Revolution, when an efficient mass production approach to education was put into place,” notes University of Alberta professor and researcher José da Costa. “The system then was meant to enable students to gain a sufficient but rudimentary understanding of reading, writing and arithmetic so they could be productive factory employees. These rudimentary skills are a far cry from our expectations of learners today.”¹

Professor da Costa co-authored a landmark 2001 class size study entitled *Literacy Achievement in Small Grade 1 Classes in High-Poverty Environments* which showed that teachers with smaller class sizes had more time to devote to each child, to support and scaffold their learning more effectively.

He adds that, “Today’s classrooms must be focused on individualizing instruction to facilitate meaningful learning, starting with what the learner knows, understands and is meaningful— it’s about creating learner-centred experiences rather than teacher-centred experiences.”² Large classes take away the focus of enabling students to learn and achieve to the best of their ability.

Class Size Matters

A 2010 comprehensive review of class size research in North America by OISE’s Nina Bascia found that smaller class sizes enable teachers to interact with individual students more frequently and use a greater variety of instructional and differentiated strategies. Students were more engaged and less disruptive in the classroom. Parents were encouraged by being able to meet with teachers more frequently and many reported a better relationship with teachers when their children were assigned to a smaller class.³

A further United States review of research in 2014 found that “The academic literature strongly supports the common-sense notion that class size is an important determinant of student outcomes.”⁴

There is also strong evidence that smaller class size has a positive impact on students with the greatest educational needs, according to OISE’s Bascia.⁵ That is echoed again by the U.S. study finding that “the payoff from class size reduction is greater for low-income and minority children, while any increases in class size will likely be most harmful to these populations.”⁶

Class Composition

Class composition is an important aspect of the discussion regarding class size. Diversity in classrooms can include students with learning exceptionalities, those with mental or physical disabilities, English and French language learners, students from low-income families or immigrants and refugee families.

Teachers consistently adapt their teaching to address the individual needs of the learners and this task becomes more onerous as class sizes become larger and more diverse, according to researchers at the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF).⁷ They note research showing that smaller class size disproportionately benefits students with special educational needs.

Ontario has a policy of integrating students with unique special needs into regular classrooms. The policy recognizes that public schools have the responsibility to support the education and growth of all children. The inclusion model is based on the notion that students' learning environment should reflect the diversity of society at large and foster understanding and appreciation for individual differences.

It is ETFO's position that to effectively support this policy and enable classroom educators to meet the individual needs of their diverse students, class sizes should be adjusted to reflect the number of students with identified special needs in each class, and appropriate resources should be allocated based on actual students' needs.

Current Ontario Situation

Grades 4-8

Ontario's investment in smaller classes in primary grades has had a positive impact on classrooms across the province; however grades 4-8 have the highest class sizes in the Kindergarten to Grade 12 system. There is no pedagogical rationale for this. In her 2017 Annual Report, the Ontario Auditor General noted the difference in class sizes saying, "It means that not all students will be benefitting from smaller class sizes."⁸ While ETFO negotiated improvements to funding for grades 4-8 class size in 2017, aimed at assisting boards with class size averages over 24.5 as a first step, the current government has taken a different direction.

In March 2019, the Ontario government announced its plan to increase the current funded average for classes in grades 4–8 from 23.84 to 24.5 as of September 2019. The effect of this proposed change will be felt differently from board to board. Boards that currently have class size averages higher than 24.5 will be required to lower their average to comply with improvements negotiated in 2017 by ETFO. However, the Conservative government's proposed changes will mean increased grade 4-8 class sizes in school boards that are currently required by regulation to maintain class size averages lower than 24.5. This will mean the loss of teaching positions in a number of boards. The government's plan will also see an increase class size in grades 9–12 from 22 to 28 students. This increase would lead to significant loss of high school teaching positions.

Full-Day Kindergarten

Although Ontario's Kindergarten program is funded to have an average class size of 26 and an average staff-child ratio of 1:13, there continue to be classes with more than 29 students.

Educators in Kindergarten classrooms face significant challenges, including the lack of adequate space to set up activity centres to support the play-based program. They also have to manage classroom behaviour when many of the students are experiencing formalized learning environments for the first time. In many cases students have learning or behavioural issues that have yet to be formally diagnosed and supported. Overcrowded classrooms limit the ability to take full advantage of the play-based program and create stressful, overly noisy and dangerous work environments.

It is not a coincidence that among ETFO members, Kindergarten educators have the highest long-term disability claim rate. Reducing class size would significantly improve Kindergarten learning and working conditions. ETFO supports implementing a Kindergarten class size cap of 26 students. Negotiated class size caps of 30 students in 2017-18, and 29 students in 2018-19 were a first step towards this goal.

The government has indicated that it will leave hard caps in place for Kindergarten through Grade 3 class size. There are indications however that it will dramatically change Full-Day Kindergarten and its current staffing model starting in 2020-2021.

Summary

There is abundant research indicating that smaller classes mean educators have more opportunity to give students individual attention. Smaller classes improve student behaviour and peer relationships and increase student engagement and achievement in the early grades. These factors, in turn, contribute to increased student success. There is also strong evidence that smaller class size has a positive impact on students with the greatest educational needs, particularly those with special needs.

It should also be noted that in British Columbia, the government's increased class sizes resulted in student disengagement and decreased achievement. As a result, the government lost public support and paid a high financial cost.

Ontario currently has one of the best public education systems in the world ensuring high quality public education for every student regardless of where they live in the province or what their particular circumstances are. Children shouldn't have to pay for government cuts.

References

^{1,2} The Learning Team, *Class Size Matters*, Vol 22, No. 1, Fall 2018, <https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Learning-Team/Volume%2022/LearningTeamVol22No1.pdf>

^{3,5} Bascia, N. 2010. *Reducing Class Size: What Do We Know?* Toronto: Canadian Education Association, <https://www.edcan.ca/articles/reducing-class-size-what-do-we-know/>

^{4,6} Schanzenbach, D.W. (2014). *Does Class Size Matter?* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. p. 10. <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/does-class-size-matter>.

⁷ Teacher Voice, *Class Size and Student Diversity: Two sides of the Same Coin*, Canadian Teachers' Federation, January 2012, <https://www.ctf-fce.ca/Research-Library/classroomdiversityandsize.pdf>

⁸ Ontario Auditor General (2017). *2017 Annual Report*, Chapter 3, Section 3.08 - Ministry Funding and Oversight of School Boards.

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POINTS FOR A LETTER TO THE EDITOR/OP ED

Note: A letter to the editor should be no more than 100-150 words. An Op Ed should be around 400-600 words - check with your local editor.

- Ontario's education system is highly regarded around the world. Students score in the top 10 internationally on language, science and math assessments and education experts from around the world come to study our system.
- In its plan to cut \$1 billion in education funding, the Conservative government is proposing to increase class size in grades 4-8 as well as in grades 9-12 this fall.
- Grades 4-8 already have the highest class size average in the Kindergarten to Grade 12 system.
- Increasing class size in grades 4-8 will harm students. Larger classes mean less one-on-one support for each student and will really impact students with special needs.
- Schools and education have changed drastically in Ontario. Inclusion policies have brought more diverse learners into the public education system. Classrooms today are large and increasingly complex, something that government and those who went to school years ago haven't taken into account.
- Many classes have students with special learning needs or behavioural issues who need additional attention. Larger class sizes will disproportionately affect these students, particularly as there is already a lack of front-line supports and services for these students.
- Educators care passionately about their students. They will tell you that a smaller class size enables them to provide more one-on-one and small group instruction and provide more attention to the particular learning needs of every student. There is substantial research confirming this.
- Smaller class size in grades 1-3 has made a big difference, allowing teachers to provide the individualized instruction that each student needs. We need the same for grades 4-8.
- Elementary educators aren't alone on this issue. In a 2018 poll conducted by ETFO, 67 per cent of Ontarians supported placing a cap on class size for grades 4-8. Tens of thousands recently sent emails to their local MPPs saying no to larger class sizes. Yet the government is moving in the opposite direction.
- Ontario's public education system strives to ensure high-quality public education for every student regardless of where they live in the province or what their particular circumstances are.
- Elementary educators will continue to stand with parents and other community members to fight for a high-quality education system that all students need and deserve.
- Every student deserves a quality education with optimal learning conditions. Children shouldn't have to pay for government cuts.

SPEAKING POINTS FOR ETFO MEMBERS ON CLASS SIZE

Background

In addition to announcing cuts to public education, the Conservative government is proposing to increase class size in grades 4-8 and grades 9-12. Teaching positions would be lost through attrition over the next four years.

Class size averages in grades 4-8 are the largest in the K-12 system but the government wants to further modify the average for classes in grades 4-8. The effects of this change would be felt differently among individual school boards.

A Negative Impact on Students

Class size increases will mean less individualized instruction for all students and even less support for those students with special needs. It will also reduce student access to classroom resources that help them learn.

Schools and education have changed drastically in Ontario. Inclusion policies have brought more diverse learners into regular classrooms. Classrooms today are large and increasingly complex.

Many classrooms have students with special learning needs or behavioural issues who need additional attention. Larger class sizes will disproportionately affect these students, particularly as there is already a lack of front line supports and services for these students.

Smaller class size enables educators to provide more one-on-one and small group instruction and more attention to the particular learning needs of every student. There is substantial research confirming that.

In a 2018 poll conducted by ETFO, 67 per cent of Ontarians supported placing a cap on class size for grades 4-8. Tens of thousands recently sent emails to their local MPPs saying no to larger class sizes. Yet the Ontario government is moving in the opposite direction.

Ontario's public education system is one of the best in the world. Our students score in the top 10 internationally on language, science and mathematics. Education experts from around the world visit our schools to study our system.

Ontario's public education system ensures a quality public education for every student regardless of where they live in the province or what their particular circumstances are.

Elementary educators will continue to stand with parents and other community members to fight for a high-quality education system that all students need and deserve. Every student deserves a quality education with optimal learning conditions. Children shouldn't have to pay for government cuts.