

Doug Johnson  
Director of Media and Technology  
I.S.D. 77, Mankato Public Schools  
Box 8713, Mankato MN 56002-8713  
Voice: 507-387-7698  
[djohns1@mail.isd77.k12.mn.us](mailto:djohns1@mail.isd77.k12.mn.us)

St Paul Pioneer Press, Jan 21, 1999

### Are Small Class Sizes Always the Answer?

How do can we improve our schools? While vouchers, school choice, charter schools, and our state's new graduation requirements are debated by the legislature, one plan seems to be overwhelmingly popular: reducing class size.

On the surface, lowering class sizes from 25 or 30 to 15 or 17 seems like something all parents would want for their children. More individual attention from teachers and more personal interaction with classmates in less crowded classrooms are desirable goals. Research showing a correlation between student achievement and class size is controversial and inconclusive, but common sense seems to dictate that the more personal time given to a child, the more productive and happier that child should be.

So both our governor and legislature have been advocating adding more teachers. Parents are happy, teachers unions are happy, and colleges of education are happy. Now I hate to sound cynical, but when everybody is that happy, something must be wrong.

There are three major concerns I have about this simple solution to the problems of education:

1. **Teacher salaries are not the only costs of lowering class sizes.** If my student population is 500 and class sizes are 25, I need 20 classrooms. If my student population is 500 and class sizes are 17, I need over nine more classrooms. Do we build a new wing (at local rather than state cost), reallocate space within the school (gyms, cafeterias, media centers, music rooms, computer labs, art rooms), or add temporary classrooms (less green space, more utility bills, land acquisition costs). More classrooms mean more maintenance, more teacher manuals, more globes, more classroom computers, more desks, more phones, more audio-visual equipment, and more administrative tasks.

2. **Quality teachers are becoming increasingly scarce.**

Already:

- 50,000 people are entering teaching now without full licensure
- Two-thirds of urban school districts allow non-certified teachers to teach
- Over 15% of all Minnesota teachers will be retiring within the next 5 years

Districts in the South are offering recruitment bonuses. I expect we can find warm bodies to fill classrooms. But do our leaders have the stomach to fund the low class size initiative to the extent that we can offer bright, thoughtful college graduates salaries that would be competitive with business or other professions? (Studies DO show that there is a direct correlation between teacher

quality and student achievement.)

**3. Underfunding a class-size reduction plan will divert funds from other effective educational areas.** The appeal of lower class sizes is so powerful, many schools will jump at the chance for additional funding for it even if that funding is not adequate to actually do the job. So where will the extra funds come from? Other budgets, of course. That will mean fewer textbooks, older library materials, broken computers, fewer classroom aides, and poorer building maintenance. Fewer extra curricular activities and support services like counselors, music teachers, and librarians. (Studies DO show that there is a direct correlation between library program quality and student achievement.) Like a half-taken prescription of antibiotics that causes an increased resistance in the targeted infection, change efforts that are underfunded create disillusionment, weaken other programs, and give the appearance of a school's inability to change. Johnson's Antibiotic Law of Educational Change: If you can afford the whole cure, don't even start it.

Parents and educators should be asking not whether they want their children in classes of 17, but do they want them in classes of 17 that meet in converted gyms with inexperienced, unlicensed teachers who have poor support materials. Instead of just advocating for lower class sizes, let's reframe the solution in terms of:

- Lowering the adult to child ratio in the schools by hiring full time paraprofessionals for each class. These folks can handle paperwork, help with minor discipline problems, and provide individualized instruction.
- Hiring adequate support staff with professional expertise to support the classroom teachers. Education has grown more complex. Teachers need help with developing better assessments, writing individualized education plans, creating lessons that incorporate technology and research skills, and dealing with severe behavior problems. What's the point of having a class of 15 if they are only being lectured to in exactly the same way as the class of 30?
- Providing adequate resources for learning. Teachers need stuff to help them teach like textbooks for every child, maps, science equipment, computers, library books, magazines, and research materials. Schools need fast Internet connections and funding for field trips and guest speakers and science fairs. And, schools need to have the funds to train teachers in how to use these resources.

Ideally education would be funded so well that schools with small class sizes would also have good classroom space, excellent materials and well-qualified teachers. Don't let our politicians off the hook with a simple answer that H.L. Menken would have called "neat, plausible, and wrong."