

Overcrowding in K-8

Part 1: Large classes make learning difficult

Eugene public schools have been hit hard by budget cuts. Since the 2008 financial crisis, District 4J has made more than \$32 million in budget cuts and spent nearly \$37 million in reserves. It's difficult to conceptualize what such continuous loss in school budgets means. To supplement the anecdotal evidence, EW is publishing this column to draw attention to the cuts, compare current conditions to that of past school years and highlight programs that attempt to fill some gaps.

Lori Allen's son is one of 31 students in a blended first- and second-grade class at Camas Ridge Elementary. Although Allen enthusiastically praises the teacher's abilities, she's concerned that with such high numbers, the teacher won't be able to develop meaningful relationships with the students and the students won't get individualized help with reading, a crucial goal at that age. She's also concerned that the class is "bordering on [being] unsafe. I don't think that having 31 6-year-olds with one adult in one place is safe."

Oregon has the third-highest class sizes in the country, according to the nonprofit Our Oregon. Research suggests that class size matters, linking smaller classes with better achievement. But most studies have looked at classes of 13 to 17. In Eugene, most classes are at least twice that large, in the 30s; at the high school level, some are three or four times bigger.

Superintendent Sheldon Berman acknowledges the importance of class size. "Class size matters, and it matters a great deal," he said at a recent event sponsored by the advocacy group Stand for Children. To reach the district's education goals, he said, teachers need to know their students and instruction needs to be individualized.

To reduce the largest elementary classes in the district, 4J added back 16 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions this fall, using about \$1.6 million in contingency and facilities funds. "The goal [is] to have elementary class sizes of no more than 30," says Kerry Delf, 4J's communications coordinator. The average class at that level is now 26, she says, but allows that some classes are smaller, while others are larger.

Efforts to measure how class size has risen over the last 20 years are frustrated by the fact that 4J doesn't track average class sizes over time. But the district does look at ratios. In 2002-03, the ratio was 23.11 students per FTE in kindergarten to second grade and 25.5 in intermediate grades. In 2012-13, the ratio is 27.5 for all elementary grades.

"The ratio doesn't tell the whole story," explains Delf. "It doesn't take into account either targeted funding for staffing or assignment of some FTE to specialist staff rather than classroom teachers."

Student-teacher ratios include all certified staff — music teachers, PE teachers, counselors, and others — so it skews what actual class size looks like because all those instructional staff aren't in the classroom at the same time. A ratio of 24-1 on paper means closer to 30 kids in a class.

By comparison, schools in Georgia have class limits of 18 for kindergartners, 21 for kids in grades 1 to 3, and 28 in grades 4 to 8.

Nonetheless, schools in many states are grappling with large class sizes. President Obama, in the first presidential debate, mentioned class size as an issue when he described a teacher in Las Vegas who had 42 students in her class.

To learn more about the effects of class size on our schools, I talked to several area teachers.

"We used to have [classes] in the mid-20s," says Dorothy Syfert, who has taught in 4J since 1985 and now teaches middle school. "Today, we are consistently looking at upper 30s and sometimes low 40s. ... [which] means that I won't be able to give the one-on-one attention to as many kids as I'd like to. Once you reach a certain point, there become more discipline issues."

Big classes make it harder for teachers to cover all the material in the curriculum. "We get further and further behind on the curriculum each year," Syfert says. On top of all this, more students have skill deficits and are coming from homes that are poor. And then there are furlough days.

Larry Lewin taught in 4J for 20 years, retiring in 1998. In his second year teaching, he had 24 fourth graders. The same school now has 34 at that level. Today, Lewin teaches UO graduate students how to teach language arts. "One of my top students was doing a spring internship in 4J," he says. "I asked, 'Are you going to try out something we talked about in class?' ... His email back to me was ... 'No, I've got 39 students, I'm not going to try it.'"

"Here I am training teachers with techniques I used in my day ... but it's not relevant to today's reality." The student went to a private charter school where class sizes are smaller. "Some of my methods are no longer appropriate," Lewin concludes.

Jeff Wyman teaches in 4J at the middle-school level. "Because classes are so big, it's harder ... for people with learning difficulties to really get what they need in the classroom setting," he says. Around the district, classes average 35 to 45 students, Wyman says. "When I came from California [7 years ago], we were complaining when we had 28."

"I can still teach, I can still present material the same [way], but it's harder to work with individuals," he says. Group sizes are bigger when he does cooperative learning. "There's no room in the classroom. I have to send kids out into the hall."

Differentiating—gearing material to individual students by their ability levels—is also harder, Wyman says, "yet we're constantly being told that ... we need to close the achievement gap and the only way you can do that is through differentiated instruction and individual instruction. When you have class sizes that are so huge that you can barely deal with it, it's almost impossible."

Coming in Part II: the effects of large class sizes at the high school level. ■

Anne Bridgman is a freelance writer and editor and an advocate for public schools and children in poverty. She lives with her husband and daughter in Eugene. To share ideas or stories about how the budget cuts in Eugene have affected your school or child, email Anne at shortchangingourschools@gmail.com.



How's your relationship? *

* With Family, Friends, Lover, Co-workers, Self

Robin Grace LCSW, Psychotherapy

25 years practicing in Oregon, Alaska and New York
541-914-4914 • www.robingrace.com



AMAZON PARK

animal clinic

Taking Care of Your Four-Legged Family for Over 30 Years



Full Service Clinic:

- Well Pet Care
- Orthopedic Surgery
- Cancer Management
- Behavior Consultations
- Dental Care

Cameron Jones, DVM
Barbara Maki, DVM
Cary Heyward, DVM

Appointments Available 8am-6pm Weekdays 9am-4pm Saturday
info@amazonparkvet.com • 541-485-0161 • 725 E. 25th Ave. Eugene

COUPON

NOW 2 LOCATIONS! ★ SY'S NEW YORK PIZZA

55 SILVER LN. 654-0603 **1211 ALDER 686-9598**

COUPONS GOOD UNTIL NOVEMBER 1ST, 2012

11AM-10PM DAILY **11AM-MIDNIGHT SUN-THU**
11AM-1AM FRI-SAT

COUPON

SERVING DELICIOUS NEW YORK PIZZA BY THE SLICE AND BY THE WHOLE PIZZA PIE

\$2.00 OFF ANY 18" LARGE PIZZA

FREE LARGE SODA W/ PURCHASE OF 2 SLICES

COUPON