

Overcrowding in Classrooms

PART 2: CHALLENGES TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Natalie Pellitier has 62 students in her advanced calculus class. When the year started at South Eugene High School, she and her fellow students made a point to arrive very early for the class: “It was basically a war for seats on the day we got to pick.”

Pellitier’s physics class is smaller — at 43. “Larger class sizes mean less student-teacher interactions,” Pellitier says. Tactile/visual learners have more difficulty understanding physics concepts when there are fewer labs due to crowding, she says. There are more lectures and less group work.

“For me, the class is less exciting and I have to work harder to understand concepts,” says Pellitier, who hastens to add that she finds her teachers top-notch. Nonetheless, she says, “I miss the opportunity to learn from my peers and hear things explained in different ways.”

Classes at South average in the 30s, with lower-level math and language arts classes in the 20s and higher-level classes in those subjects in the 40s. Some — like Pellitier’s calculus class — are much larger.

Jerry Henderson, former principal at South Eugene High School, was one of several retired administrators asked by Superintendent Sheldon Berman last spring to go back to school to observe conditions today versus when they worked there. When asked what he saw, he cites “huge” class sizes. “I thought they were huge when I was there” in 2002 and there were advanced math classes with 30 students, he says. “Close to 40 in a class, we thought was ridiculous, and now they’re close to 60. ... That’s criminal.”

Nonetheless, he says, kids who are bright and have resources will be able to handle large class sizes, and they’ll learn, though probably not at the same depth. “The issues are with the kids who really need the support and help,” Henderson says. As for differentiating in large classes, Henderson says you can do it, but “you can’t do it as well.”

Karina Wolf, a senior at North Eugene High School, has classes in the mid- to upper 30s. “This makes it difficult to get through material,” she says, “and things get rushed at the end, making grasping concepts difficult.” It’s also difficult trying to compete for help with more than 30 other kids, she says.

Larger classes affect teachers as well as students. Scott Zarnegar, a science teacher who has taught at South for five years, says a lot of teachers are changing the way they give assignments. “I’m moving into more completion-type work and more Scantron work,” he says, assignments in which the students fill in bubbles, the teacher takes the papers to a machine, and a scanner reads the answers.

Moreover, Zarnegar says crowded classes have “a pretty massive effect on every teacher and every student,” citing the loss of relationships. “A lot of people don’t realize just how much you can motivate your students when you know them personally. When you have 40 kids in your class or 35, there’s just no time to get to know everyone, so what you see is that there’s a disconnect between the teacher and the students.”

Oregon’s Chief Education Officer Rudy Crew spoke to that issue at the Portland City Club last month when he said “the quality of that relationship is what your tax dollars are paying for,” according to a report by Oregon Live. Instructors have to be able to engage their students, he said and “a teacher can’t do that with a huge number of students.”

Teachers’ class load is also affected, according to Randy Bernstein, principal at South. Larger class sizes make it more difficult for teachers to individualize, get through all the material, and answer all students’ questions, he says. Adding just five students to each of five classes boosts a teacher’s workload by 25 kids, he points out, which translates into 25 more exams, papers and homework assignments to grade.

“Most of our teachers now are carrying loads of over 150 students and many of them are approaching 150 to 200 students,” Bernstein says. “It really does dilute a teacher’s ability to be responsive when they’ve got that many more students to provide feedback and support for.”

Bernstein says teachers are professionals who really care, but the class size situation, coming on top of other funding cuts, has made them “feel as stretched as they do and feel that it’s that much more difficult to do their job well ... They want to be able to do their job better than the hand that they’ve been dealt.”

4J has taken several approaches to large classes at the high school level.

This year, staff were added back at Churchill High School because enrollment there rose considerably for the first time in years, according to Kerry Delf, the district’s communications coordinator.

Changing to the 3x5 trimester schedule (Churchill changed to a common schedule this year; the other three high schools will make the change next year) is expected to decrease average class size 6 to 11 percent, with classes averaging about 30 students, according to 4J’s website.

In addition, high school teachers are using instructional technology to help differentiate and provide more time on task, trying to make large-group instruction more engaging, and mining information from tests to facilitate learning.

Henderson says approaches like these that target how classes are taught are useful, but adds, “you can only take that so far.” Ultimately, he says, decisions about class size are “part of the bigger picture — a question of our values.”

Bernstein agrees: “I’ve heard people say that communities are only as healthy as our schools. If we’re shortchanging our schools, then our communities won’t be as healthy. I hope people can make that connection.” ■

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