

OPINION

Disturbing Move to Larger Class Sizes

Budget cuts risk a more prosperous future

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

The struggling economy has, unfortunately, forced state and local governments across the country to make cuts in much needed services and programs.



The nation's public schools have been hit particularly hard by these cuts. First, some districts reduced or completely eliminated physical education classes and arts programming – programming that has been proven to enhance student academic performance.

Then, others began to eliminate teachers, slowly growing classrooms sizes. Now, it seems even more school districts are

looking to reduce the number of teachers on the payroll and combine classrooms...all in an effort to save money.

A recent article in the New York Times shed light on this disturbing movement toward larger class sizes. According to the article, the size of

11th and 12th grade classes in Los Angeles has increased by more than 40 students. Detroit is considering increasing the size of its high school classes to 60 students. Though school officials there say it's unlikely classes will grow that large, it's disturbing the conversation has even turned in that direction.

It doesn't end there. Georgia, Nevada,

Ohio and Wisconsin have all relaxed their restrictions on class size. Idaho and Texas are deciding whether or not they are going to grow they're classrooms.

Those who see cutting back on teachers and increasing class sizes as a solution to budget woes are the same people who don't believe class size matters when it comes to student achievement.

However, multiple studies have shown us that class size does matter. Research shows that, overall, students perform better in smaller classes.

Poor and minority children seem to do best in smaller classes and improve at twice the rate of the average student when the student-teacher ratio is low. But who needs research? Common sense tells us that more students mean more distract-

tions for the teacher and less individual attention for the students.

During his State of the Union address, President Obama called on America to invest in education. By putting our resources toward our children, we will, in effect, be putting a down payment on a more prosperous future for America.

School districts should not sacrifice student performance during a time of education crisis. America has fallen behind other countries when it comes to producing skilled workers; our nation is no longer a nation of innovators.

To jeopardize our children's future is to jeopardize our nation's future.

Greg Mathis is a former Michigan District Court Judge and current syndicated television show judge.

Deamonte Driver's Continuing Legacy

A Victory in the battle to insure children

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Four years ago, an entire community was devastated in Prince George's County, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C., when 12-year-old seventh grader Deamonte Driver died after complications from a tooth abscess.

His mother Alyce, who worked at low-paying jobs, had searched for a dentist to treat Deamonte's toothache who would accept Medicaid, but she was unsuccessful.

Ultimately, Alyce took Deamonte to a hospital emergency room, where he was given medicine for a headache, sinusitis, and a dental abscess and sent home. But his condition soon took a turn for the worse, and he was back at the hospital being rushed to surgery where it was discovered that bacteria from his abscessed tooth had spread to his brain.

Heroic efforts were made to save him, including two operations and eight weeks of additional care and therapy totaling about \$250,000, but it was all too late. Deamonte died on Feb. 25, 2007—when his life could have been saved by a routine dental visit and an \$80 tooth extraction.

Tooth decay is the single most common

chronic childhood disease—five times more common than asthma and seven times more common than hay fever. Dental care is an often overlooked but critical component of comprehensive health care for children. Pain and suffering due to untreated dental disease can lead to problems in speaking, eating, and learning.

For children caught without dental coverage, dental problems can quickly become more than "just" a toothache. Research shows children who lack basic den-

Untreated tooth decay is progressive and can be devastating to children's long-term health, educational achievements, self image, and overall success.

— Children's Dental Health Project Study

tal care miss more days of school and see their overall health suffer.

In fact, children miss more than 51 million hours of school each year due to dental-related illnesses. According to the Children's Dental Health Project, "The oral health of children has a significant and lasting impact on the productivity of our existing and future employees and leaders... Untreated tooth decay is progressive and can be devastating to children's long-term health, educational achievements, self image, and overall success."

And as Deamonte's death showed, in extreme cases lack of dental care can even lead to fatal complications.

Health insurance coverage is a strong predictor of access to dental care. But despite its importance, dental coverage is largely excluded from many private insurance plans, and pediatric dentists can be difficult to find. For every child without health insurance, there are 2.6 children without dental coverage. Uninsured children are 2.5 times less likely than children with insurance (public or private) to receive dental care.

Since Deamonte's death, Congress has

recognized dental coverage as an important component of comprehensive care for children, enacting major policy changes to improve dental coverage for children.

In 2009, the reauthorization of the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) required states to provide dental coverage to enrolled children, and gave states the option to provide dental benefits to certain children who do not qualify for full CHIP coverage.

In 2010, the health reform bill known as the Affordable Care Act required that all insurance plans to be offered through new health insurance exchanges starting in 2014 include oral care for children, and

prohibited these insurers from charging out of pocket expenses for preventive pediatric oral health services. These two new requirements alone will give millions of children financial access to dental health services, many for the first time.

Other provisions in the Affordable Care Act will help train more dental health providers. A new report by the Children's Dental Campaign of the Pew Center on the States emphasizes the importance of availability of providers: the authors calculate that more than 31 million Americans are "unserved," which means they live in areas where they can't find a dentist in or near their community. In seven states, more than 20 percent of the population can't find a dentist.

Maryland, Deamonte's home state, has become a model for reform. One innovative solution helping to reach some underserved children like Deamonte is mobile dental clinics staffed by volunteer dentists, and in November the Deamonte Driver Dental Project Mobile Unit, a large van now equipped as a three-chair children's dental clinic, made its first stop by spending the day at Deamonte's old school.

These victories are all key steps in the right direction, and part of the solution still needed in order to make sure all children—poor and wealthy, rural, suburban, and urban—receive the dental health care they need to survive and thrive.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund

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CALL 503-288-0033 FAX 503-288-0015

news@portlandobserver.com

ads@portlandobserver.com

subscription@portlandobserver.com

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Portland Observer, PO Box 3137, Portland, OR 97208