

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

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Does class size make a difference?**Opinions vary as much as number of students in each schoolroom**

Monday, February 11, 2008

Last updated 12:33 a.m. PT

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P-I REPORTER

As parents shop around for public schools during the February enrollment season, they're not just checking out the buildings and teachers -- they're looking at how many classmates their children would have.

Smaller class sizes, they reason, will mean more attention from the teacher for their child -- and perhaps a better learning environment. Elementary schools have taken note, and many advertise their class sizes on Web sites and talk up their numbers during school tours.

Yet district records show the number of students in traditional elementary classes varies widely from school to school -- anywhere from 14 to 32, according to a review of January enrollment counts -- and some of the largest class sizes can be found at some of the district's most sought-after elementary schools.

Given that, does class size really matter?

For disadvantaged or at-risk students, certainly, but class size has taken on too much importance for other students, said Maria Goodloe-Johnson, superintendent of Seattle Public Schools.

"The bottom line is quality of teaching in the classroom," said Goodloe-Johnson, a former teacher and principal. "Everybody would like to have a smaller number of students in a class ... but really, the difference is about the quality of instruction in the classroom, not about the size."

Not everyone would agree. The Washington Education Association, which represents the state's teachers, has made lobbying for lower class sizes its top priority this legislative season. And voters felt strongly enough about the issue to approve Initiative 728, which for the past seven years has provided hundreds of thousands of dollars to public school districts around the state to help reduce kindergarten through fourth-grade class sizes. In Seattle, the district uses the bulk of its I-728 money -- nearly \$8 million a year -- to reduce class sizes.

Education experts can agree on one point when it comes to class sizes: There isn't a lot of scientific research on the subject.

There have been a few studies demonstrating some academic improvement in children enrolled in small classes for kindergarten through third grade, most notably the four-year Tennessee Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio study in the late 1980s. The four-year,



 zoom

Andy Rogers / P-I

Second-graders Costa Colachis Glass, left, Peter Springer, Aniya Beck and Vitaly Repkov listen to teacher Heather Christothoulou at McGilvra Elementary in Seattle. Her class has 20 children, while other schools may have up to 30 in a class.

randomized study found that younger children in small classes of 13 to 17 students saw academic gains in reading and math when compared with their peers in classes of 22 to 26 students.

Education expert Tom Loveless, a former sixth-grade teacher and Harvard public policy professor, agrees there's some evidence that smaller class sizes will help in kindergarten or first grade. But it's not as strong of a correlation as people may think, he said.

He notes that the average class size in Japan and several other Asian countries is around 40 students -- and those students often surpass those in the U.S. on international achievement tests.

During his 10 years in the classroom, his smallest class had 29 students, his largest 35. "I didn't notice that much of a difference, to be honest," he said.

Many elementary school teachers, however, say they notice tangible differences when they teach smaller classes.

Researchers haven't pinpointed a "magic number" for the ideal class size, but Jeremy Finn, a professor of education at the State University of New York-Buffalo, said he's confident that classes of fewer than 20 students have a positive effect.

Finn, who was asked to consult on the Tennessee study, said he was initially skeptical that class size mattered much for students in kindergarten through third grade. But after studying years' worth of data, he's since come to believe that smaller classes provide both immediate and long-term benefits, particularly for disadvantaged or at-risk students.

"We don't know scientifically why small class sizes work, but the main explanation seems to be that kids become better behaved," he said. Students who might slip through the cracks in a larger class or cause mischief are less likely to do so in a smaller class, he said. "There's no chance for anybody to hide in the back corner of the room."

At the award-winning Maple Elementary on Beacon Hill, third-grade teacher Marcia Ingerslev wistfully remembers the year she had only 19 students. She was able to develop stronger relationships with students and parents and to do more hands-on projects with the children, such as starting a small garden to teach science lessons.

Ingerslev's class sizes are now closer to 26 students than 19, and while she does her best to personalize her teaching to each student, she said, it becomes more difficult as the class size grows.

"When I had 19 kids, you could have awakened me in the middle of the night and asked me, 'Where is Truong in math?' and I could tell you he was working on sevens in multiplication," she said. "If you have 26, 27 kids, you could be driving down the road and wonder, 'Did I count her absent today?' ... I'm a very conscientious teacher, but I know I do a better job when there are fewer students."

At some schools, such as McGilvra Elementary, parents have taken matters into their own hands. Nearly eight years ago, members of the parent-teacher association at the Madison Park school researched class size and decided that if the school district couldn't provide money to keep them down, they'd find a way to make it happen.

The school now has one of the most sophisticated and prosperous PTAs in the city, holding annual fundraisers that bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars. Thanks to the financial help, the school has

two extra teachers and an art teacher and keeps its class sizes at an enviable level -- around 21 students per class.

In contrast, the Seattle teachers union contract caps class sizes at 26 students in kindergarten through third grade, and 28 students in fourth and fifth grades. (Teachers may have larger class sizes, but the district will provide more help in the classroom or more pay.)

Of course, small class sizes can't guarantee a perfect educational experience, for either the students or the teacher. On a recent day in second-grade teacher Heather Christothoulou's class at McGilvra, there's still a lot of fidgeting, doodling and pencil dropping as students review math worksheets.

But she still sees a world of difference between now and her first year, when she worked with a class of 28 students.

"Being able to work with 20 kids does make a difference in the way I'm able to impact each individual," she said. "It doesn't make the job easier, but it allows us to go deeper with our lessons, in what we study and with our understanding of the student's needs."

ON THE WEB

For more information on enrolling in Seattle Public Schools, visit seattleschools.org/area/eso/story.dxml

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