Facing the Facts about class sizes



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The more things change, the more (some) things stay the same.

I started out as an English teacher at Eastern Goldfields Senior High School in 1984. Since then, change in school education and society has been unrelenting and accelerating. Services and support for public schools in WA have also

changed: in the last decade they have been centralised and reduced.

One thing hasn't changed: After 40 years the maximum class size in Years 4-10 is still 32 in WA public schools. That is way more than other states – like Queensland at 28 or Victoria at 25-26.

We are told that investment in smaller class sizes for our kids would be a waste of money because it would have no impact on student achievement. I doubt there are too many past or present teachers who find that credible – nor too many parents. And it turns out the evidence to support the claim is seriously flawed.

Isn't it just obvious that bigger classes mean more work and less attention for each student? There is more to prepare, more to mark, more on which to report, more kids to follow up in relation to their behaviour, their attendance, their wellbeing – and just plain more administrivia to keep the show on the road. But the sheer volume of work is only the beginning.

Bigger classes mean more work, but they also mean higher numbers of more complex kids in each class. More work, greater complexity of work – combined with unrelenting growth in both expectations and more and more unsupported change – means increasing workload intensity.

That drives burnout and that is at the heart of the number of people leaving the profession, reducing their hours or planning to leave.

We don't have a shortage of teachers in WA so much as we have a shortage of teachers willing and able to teach. Teachers feel unsupported, under-appreciated and exhausted.

Bigger classes with increasing complexity of individual needs, especially where there is compounding disadvantage, mean less focus, more disruption, less teaching and less learning.

Bigger class sizes impact the climate and the culture of the classroom – and the school. More disruption means less order, less safety, reduced engagement, less satisfaction and more conflict – and takes away even more time of teachers, school leaders and other school staff.

That is recipe for a spiral dive. That cannot be good for kids.

This is all well and good, but what about that famous evidence?

Dr Carmen Lawrence and her panel took a good look at that and report that there is ample evidence that reducing class sizes does make a difference for students and makes the biggest difference for the most vulnerable children and young people. The panel's claims are well referenced and argued.

Well then, what about the cost? And what about the teacher shortage?

No one expects all class sizes to be magically reduced overnight. But given the cost of not acting (the cost to student wellbeing and learning, the cost to teacher recruitment and retention, and the ultimate cost to the community in lost productivity and more and more demand for costly human services into the future) can we afford to keep avoiding planning and commencing progressive reduction in class sizes?

The *Facing the Facts* report tells us that:

- Class sizes in WA are higher than any other state and have not changed despite the growing complexity of student needs.
- Smaller class sizes result in better educational outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged groups.
- Larger classes mean increased teacher workload and less individual attention for students.

We have a real issue with teacher and school leader workload, *Facing the Facts* tells us. Understanding and Reducing the Workload of Teachers and Leaders in Western Australian Public Schools - the Department's own report - tells us.

The core business of teaching is about learning in the classroom. It's true that non-core distractions need to be swept away. Also, it's time to face the facts and start an honest conversation about class sizes, real costs and benefits, and getting on with targeted, incremental, ongoing and expanding class size reduction.

Teachers and school leaders desperately need to be given some real hope.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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