

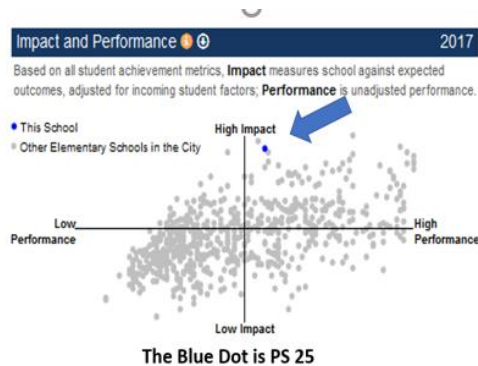


Class Size Matters
124 Waverly Pl., New York, NY 10011
Phone: 212-529-3539
info@classsizematters.org
www.classsizematters.org

Testimony before the NYC Council Education Committee on the Need to Reduce Class Size in the NYC Public Schools

Thank you Chair Treyger for holding these important hearings today on a subject that is so central to the concerns of parents, teachers and students. My name is Leonie Haimson, and I'm the Executive Director of Class Size Matters

In February 2018, the Panel for Educational Policy approved the closure of PS 25, a small school in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. Parents sued, and got a preliminary injunction against the school's closure. The next year, in 2019, at the court hearing on the lawsuit, the DOE withdrew the proposal, and said they would keep the school open for another year.



How is this relevant to these hearings on class size? The DOE had proposed closing the school, despite the fact that according to the school performance dashboard, PS 25 was the fourth best out of 661 public elementary schools in NYC and the second best in Brooklyn, in terms of its positive

impact on learning, while controlling for student background. It also outperformed every charter school citywide but one.¹

According to the DOE's own statistics, PS 25 surpassed the city average in test scores, while having a very high needs student population, including 100% students in poverty, 31% with disabilities, and 22% homeless.

The school outperformed other schools with similar students by an amazing 21 percentage points in ELA and Math, while its special needs students outperformed similar students by 47 percentage points in ELA. It also scored very high in all the other standards DOE uses to evaluate schools, including effective school leadership, trust, and collaborative teachers. Because of its stellar performance, the school was named a "Reward school" in 2018 by the New York State Education Department.²

Why was the school so successful? By all accounts, PS 25 teachers are excellent and the class sizes very small: only 10-18 students per class, far below the city averages. In fact, the school provides something

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/05/24/why-is-new-york-city-trying-to-close-a-successful-public-high-needs-school/>

² <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2018/commissioner-identifies-155-high-achieving-and-high-progress-schools-reward-schools>

of a “natural experiment” in class size, showing what might be accomplished if the DOE decided that class size reduction was a priority.

Sadly, it is not. In the CFE case, the state’s Court of Appeals concluded in 2003 that class sizes were too large in NYC schools to provide our students with their constitutional right to a sound basic education, writing that “[T]ens of thousands of students are placed in overcrowded classrooms... The number of children in these straits is large enough to represent a systemic failure.”³

And yet despite this decision, and the fact that when Mayor de Blasio promised that if elected he would lower class sizes in all grades to far lower levels, class sizes have stagnated during his time in office and remain 15-30 percent on average larger than in the rest of the state.⁴ In the early grades, they are substantially larger (by 10 percent) than in 2003, when the CFE decision was issued. We have charts in the appendix showing the trend in class size over time.

Yet these averages don’t tell the whole story. The number of students in classes of 25 or more in Kindergarten has increased 68 percent since 2007, and the number of children in grades 1st through 3rd in classes of thirty or more has increased by nearly 3000 percent. Nearly half of all middle school students (44 percent) are in classes that large, and more than half (56 percent) of all high school students have at least one core academic class with thirty students or more. This fall, there were at least 325,430 students in classes thirty or more this year.⁵

Part of the reason class sizes have increased so sharply in the early grades is that the city used to adhere to “a side agreement” to limit class sizes to 28 or less in grades 1st through 3rd; an agreement that was first made in 1986, between Peter Vallone as City Council Speaker and Rudy Giuliani as Mayor, and funded through a special program pushed through by the Council.⁶ Yet the DOE stopped adhering to this agreement in 2010, which caused class sizes in those grades to explode in many grades. Meanwhile, the UFT class size limits in grades 1st through 5th grades remains at 32 students per class – a contractual cap which has not changed in over 50 years.

The research on the benefits of class size is clear, especially for children in the early grades. Project STAR, a large-scale experiment carried out in Tennessee in the 1980’s, showed that those students who were randomly placed in smaller classes in K-3 did better in every single way that could be measured. They received better grades, better test scores, were less likely to be held back and less likely to have disciplinary problems.

When they reached high school, they were more likely to graduate on time, be headed to college, and graduate with a STEM degree and own their own home more than twenty years later.

³ Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc., et al. v. State of New York, et al., 100 N.Y.2d 893, 911-12 (2003) (“CFE II”)

⁴ De Blasio’s promises to lower class sizes are memorialized in two surveys he completed in 2013, one of which he personally signed at a candidate forum at Murry Bergtraum HS. See <https://nyckidspac.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/NYC-Kids-PAC-Questionnaire-Bill-de-Blasio.pdf> and <https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Bill-deBlasio.pdf>

⁵ We counted only HS students in social studies classes 30 or more in order not to double count students. See more data in the Appendix and at <https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/citywide-class-size-2.25.21-updated.pptx>

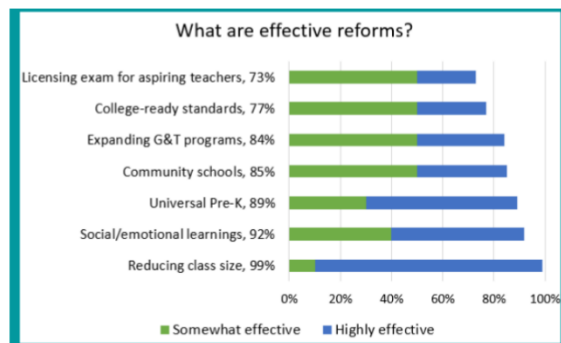
⁶ See the archived UFT page from 2011 here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110416005653/http://www.uft.org/fags/what-are-class-size-limits-my-grade>

Though no large-scale experiment of a similar kind has been done on class size in the middle and upper grades, there are many studies which show a strong correlation between smaller classes in these grades and students' receiving better test scores, exhibiting improved non-cognitive skills such as persistence, and having higher graduation rates as well, while controlling for other observable factors.

Most importantly, all the gains made as a result of smaller classes have been shown to be twice as large for disadvantaged students and students of color, who make up the majority of kids in the NYC public schools. That is why class size reduction is one of only a handful of reforms proven to narrow the achievement or opportunity gap.

Since Mayor de Blasio took office, achievement levels have been flat or declining, as measured on the national exams called the NAEPs, the most reliable assessments. And the gap in test scores between students of different economic and racial groups has widened.⁷

None of this is particularly surprising. In smaller classes, all students, but especially those who are struggling, have their academic and social-emotional needs better met, are able to receive more feedback from their teachers, feel like their teachers care about them more, and this motivates them show effort and stay on track in their school work. It is the personal, human connection that inspires them to learn. One of the saddest things is that many teachers say they don't have time to answer all their students' questions because the classes are too large.



Instead, a common refrain I hear from parents is that their children report that their teachers tell them to ask at least two other students first before asking them a question. As a result, too many students become confused and lose interest, become passively disengaged or act out in order to obtain the attention they crave.

This is why NYC teachers say that class size reduction would be the best way to improve our schools; and

why NYC parents put smaller classes among their top two priorities each year since the DOE surveys have been given.⁸ Principals agree; in a survey we sponsored along with Emily Horowitz, a Sociology professor at St. Francis college, principals responded that to be able to provide a quality education, class sizes should be no more than 20 in grades K-3, 23 in grades 4-5, and 24 in all other grades.⁹

And yet to this day, the Mayor has completely ignored the need to lower class size, even when it comes to our most struggling schools. Though DOE officials promised the state to focus their class size efforts in the Renewal schools, we found that in nearly half (or 42 percent) of these schools, there was no

⁷ <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2018/04/10/yet-again-new-york-city-shows-no-gains-on-a-national-reading-and-math-exam/>

⁸ <http://www.uft.org/files/attachments/annual-teacher-survey-2014.pdf>

And <https://infohub.nyced.org/reports-and-policies/school-quality/nyc-school-survey/survey-archives>

⁹ This was the median response; the mean was 20, 22, and 25 depending on grade level; and the mode was 20 and 25. See https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/principal_survey_report_10.08_final1.pdf

reduction in average class size from November 2014 to November 2017, and in 73 percent, maximum class sizes continued to be at 30 or more. ¹⁰

Renewal schools that did lower class size, however, were significantly more likely to show success, as measured by their impact scores on the DOE School Performance dashboard, which controls for student need and background.

Table 1- Correlation Between Renewal Schools' Average Class Sizes and School Impact

Class Size Data	N	Pearson Correlation (R Value)	P Value
November 2016 Class Size			
Size	85	-0.326**	0.002
February 2017 Class Size	85	-0.314**	0.003

*** Correlation is Significant at the .01 Level (1-tailed)*

Chancellor Carranza is the first DOE Chancellor in many years who when asked, admits that he knows how important class size is important and that as a teacher, he knew he could reach his students better in a class of 24 than 30. And yet when questioned by the council at hearings or parents at town hall meetings what he intends to do about it, Carranza's response is almost exactly the same as Chancellor Klein or Walcott used to give: He will wait until the state provides more foundation aid and then he will let principals do what they want with the extra funding. This is not an acceptable response. Why?

First of all, NYC students should not have to wait for the state to fully fund foundation aid, when hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent by DOE on less effective, proven programs— including a substantial increase in bureaucracy and more standardized testing -- and the city continues to enjoy a surplus. Secondly, the "Fair Student Funding" system, into which the additional Foundation Aid would flow, is designed to incentivize principals to keep class sizes as large as possible —because school funding is tied to the number of students they enroll. Lastly, class size reduction won't happen in any systematic and rational fashion unless the DOE has a plan to make it happen, by providing the staff and the space where it's most needed, as they did when they expanded preK.

That's why we are calling for the City Council to provide \$100 million in next year's budget to be allocated specifically towards class size reduction, starting first in the early grades and in struggling schools. This amount represents less than .03 percent of DOE total budget of \$36 billion. This would represent the first step in a longer process of providing NYC children with the truly equitable and excellent education they deserve, and which parents and educators have known for decades are badly needed for our schools to significantly improve.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

¹⁰ <https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Renewal-Schools-Testimony-Final-2.27.18.pdf>