

## Report from the Class Size Advisory Group

February 4, 2013

### Process

At the request of the Superintendent, an advisory group was formed, including parent representatives from all six schools, administrators, teacher representatives from the Belmont Education Association, and a member of the School Committee. This group was charged with the task of "exploring various options for improving class sizes throughout the district and to propose various ways to manage the student population within available financial and physical resources and in light of the district's educational priorities." (Superintendent's memo, Nov. 7, 2012) Our process for investigating class size issues and evaluating options included the following.

1. The Brookings Institution's executive summary entitled *Class Size: What Research Says and What it Means for State Policy* was reviewed. Studies, considered to be rigorous and credible, had conflicting findings. While some studies found no benefits to smaller class sizes, others concluded that large reductions in class size (7-10 fewer students) did have long-term effects on student achievement. This increased academic achievement was greatest when introduced at the early grades and for students from less advantaged backgrounds. The research indicates that the quality of teaching is a greater factor in determining academic achievement than class size.

2. The Assistant Superintendent's *Class Size Report* (presented to School Committee on Nov. 13, 2012) was reviewed. The following data points were particularly relevant to our work.

#### BPS Class Size Guidelines

	Guidelines	Actual
K	18-22	19-22
1	19-23	20-26
2	19-23	21-25
3	20-24	16-26
4	20-24	18-26
5	20-24	25-28
6	22-26	20-29
7	22-26	17-31
8	22-26	13-30

#### Belmont High School

	#	%
Sections with 10 or fewer	6	2%
Number of sections with 11-15	30	8%
Number of sections with 16-20	110	31%
Number of sections with 21-25	135	38%
Number of sections with 26-30	68	19%
Number of sections over 30	3	<1%
Performing groups over 30	7	2%

3. Floor plans from each of the six schools were analyzed. While all six schools could free up space to accommodate additional classes, Wellington was the only school with classrooms currently unused.
4. Enrollment reports from the New England School Development Council (NESDEC) were considered.
5. Current class size data was analyzed and compared across the six schools.
6. The committee considered concerns and recommendations made by parents and teachers that were communicated to Dr. Kingston prior to the inception of the committee, as well as comments subsequently made to committee members. Each and every suggestion was evaluated to determine feasibility in light of issues faced by the entire school community. In addition, the committee was sensitive to the concerns of the overall Belmont community regarding the financial issues at stake in setting forth proposed solutions.
7. In light of the process outlined above, the advisory group identified specific classes/grades where we recommend that action be taken to reduce class size for the 2013-14 school year. Although the needs of the elementary schools are perhaps more acutely felt at this time, the committee's review showed significant concerns with current class size and enrollment in middle school which must be fairly addressed as part of both short and long-term solutions.

### **Recommendations for the 2013-2014 School Year**

The task force identified two areas of immediate concern. We recommend that the district reduce class sizes in the following grades/schools:

#### **1. Current 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Class at Wellington (for 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Year)**

There are 23-26 students in each of the five 1<sup>st</sup> grade classrooms at Wellington. This is well above the School Committee's suggested guideline of 19-23 per classroom. We recommend that the administration budget for two additional teachers to allow for six 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classrooms in the 2013-2014 academic year. (There are currently four 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classes.) We do, however, recommend that any hiring is delayed until late spring or early summer so as to avoid spending unnecessary resources if the number of students should decrease.

While we recognize the sizable commitment that this recommendation suggests, it takes into consideration the size of the 1<sup>st</sup> grade cohort across the district. Currently, there are 347 students in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. This is the largest grade level enrollment K-12. If the district does not fund six 2<sup>nd</sup> grades at the Wellington, and instead freezes enrollment, there is little capacity for the other three elementary schools to absorb the overflow. The Winn Brook School already exceeds School Committee guidelines of 19-23 students with classes of 23-24. ~~The Butler School has 21-24 students in 1<sup>st</sup> grade classrooms and the Burbank School has limited capacity to~~ absorb students (currently 21-22) if they are to stay within recommended guidelines.

Assuming that there is capacity in another school, we recommend that enrollment continues to be monitored and frozen when class size exceeds the School Committee's guidelines.

We determined that redistricting was unlikely to resolve the class size issues at the Wellington School at this time. A shift of students, based on street address, would not necessary provide relief in the classrooms where it is needed. The differential in class sizes across the district in not overly significant. Redistricting could, therefore, result in overcrowding at one of the other buildings. Currently, Wellington is the only building where there is space to add classrooms without any impact on programs or services.

## **2. Current 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Class at Chenery (for 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Year)**

This year's 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes range in size from 25-28 students. The School Committee's recommended guideline is 20-24 students per classroom. We recommend adding an additional two teachers to provide for another 6<sup>th</sup> grade team for the 2013/2014 academic year.

### **Suggestions for Long-term Planning**

Enrollment reports from NESDEC were considered. The January 4, 2011 projections suggested an increase of approximately 800 students in the ten years to follow; however, the November 15, 2012 report projected an increase of approximately 450 students in the ten years to follow. Despite the variation in the NESDEC studies, it would appear that we can expect significant growth over the short and long-term. The Assistant Superintendent's class size report indicates that enrollment rose by 96 students from the 2011/12 school year to the 2012/13 school year (based on Oct. 1 reports).

- There may be an opportunity to reduce class sizes that are deemed unacceptably large by reallocating our staffing resources across the district. It is worth noting that 41% of the high school sections have fewer than 20 students. While the committee acknowledges the complexity of high school scheduling, we recommend that the distribution of staffing resources be examined in order to maximize efficiency across our system.
- We recommend studying the 7<sup>th</sup> grade academic model to see if there are any ways to make it more similar to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade model, which spreads the students across more academic sections thus reducing the class sizes.
- There may be opportunities to reduce class sizes by creating multi-grade level classrooms where appropriate. There are successful classroom models that combine two consecutive grade levels into one classroom. This could prove to reduce class size by allowing students to be more equitably distributed across two grade levels without adding a teacher/classroom. It would, however, require careful planning in order to be successful.
- In the event new housing or new developments are constructed in Belmont which will significantly impact enrollment, we recommend that redistricting be reevaluated at that time.
- Institute a policy of developer exactions or "impact fees" from developers whose projects will have an impact on our enrollment.

- Explore space planning at Chenery in regard to the LABBB Program.
- Given the constraints that the system is under, and in light of increasing enrollment, community expectations, and identified priorities, we strongly recommend that opportunities for greater funding be explored.

The committee was very sensitive to the concerns of the larger Belmont community when formulating its recommendations, particularly with regard to the financial impact of any such recommendations. The committee also recognized the high quality of education students obtain in Belmont, which is desirous to maintain. The committee balanced these factors when considering its recommendations.

It became quickly clear that any recommendation to address the issue of class size in Belmont would require additional funding. The committee therefore focused its efforts on creating both short and long-term solutions so that the greatest needs could be addressed in the most economic fashion in the short term, while anticipated needs could be budgeted for in order to avoid a crisis situation in the future. It should be noted that committee members themselves had differing views on how best to address the issues of class in our community. The recommendations proposed reflect a balanced consideration of these views and an ultimate agreement on the proposals.

#### **Class Size Advisory Group**

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