

2/5/19

To: John P. Phelan, Superintendent

From: The Class Size Working Group

Cliff Gallant, Marc Lefebvre, Theresa Milstein, Brenda Johnston, Tricia Clifford, Dan O'Brien, Jon Hartunian, Janice Darias

Date: January 10, 2019

Re: Class Size Working Group Recommendations

As noted in the Side Letter of Agreement in the 2017-2020 Unit A Contractual Agreement, a Class Size Working Group was created and included four members appointed by the Belmont Education Association, Cliff Gallant, Marc Lefebvre, Theresa Milstein, and Brenda Johnston, and four members appointed by the Superintendent, Tricia Clifford, Dan O'Brien, Jon Hartunian, and Janice Darias. The group met on November 14, December 12, and January 9 to review class size data, discuss improvements that have been achieved and challenges that still persist, and determine recommendations to present in this report.

The group reviewed and discussed the following data:

- 2017-18 Enrollment and Class Size presentation to School Committee, October 10, 2017
- 2018-19 Enrollment and Class Size presentation to School Committee, December 4, 2018
- Spreadsheet of number of elementary classes, 2015-16 → 2018-19
- BPS Class Size/Enrollment Report for October 1, 2018
- BPS Class Size/Enrollment Report for December 1, 2018

The group appreciates the 29 FTEs that have been added in the last four years thanks to the override approved by the Town of Belmont in 2015. This has resulted in a reduction in class size at every level of the district. We noted the following improvements:

- In 2018-19 there are 82 classrooms in kindergarten through fourth grade, up from 76 in 2015-16.
- In 2018-19, only 7% of elementary classes exceed the class size guidelines.
 - In 2017-18, 35% of elementary classes exceeded the class size guidelines.
 - In 2016-17, 42% of elementary classes exceeded the class size guidelines.
- As a result of adding two grade 5 teachers in 2018-19, the average class size dropped from 26 students to 23 students.
- The average class size at the middle school and the high school has decreased in the last few years.

While these improvements have made a positive impact on educators and their students' learning experience, challenges persist as a result of overall caseload (especially for middle and high school educators), the increasingly complex needs of some students; and issues related to scheduling. These challenges and recommendations are explained in more detail below.

Overall Caseload

- While the size of an individual class may be appropriate, the caseload (defined as the total number of students served by a particular educator) of a high school or middle school teacher may still be high.
- At the middle school, students are in teams that used to be approximately 100 students. Now a team has 120+ students, which makes it much harder to support middle level learners in the way that we know is most effective for their social, emotional, and academic development and learning.
- Similarly, a high school teacher's caseload has also increased. In 2012-13, only three teachers' caseload exceeded 125 students. In 2017-18 twenty teachers' caseloads exceeded 125 students, and in 2018-19, fourteen teachers' caseloads exceeded 125 students. Although high school students are not on a team, we know from our social emotional and culturally responsive teaching work that it is still critically important to their academic achievement that they feel known and supported by their teachers. This becomes increasingly difficult when their caseload is so high.
- The caseloads of our middle school core teachers (art, music, physical education, health, technology engineering) have increased as a result of increasing enrollment, especially given the fact that they teach all students, and also there are still some classes that have a class size that exceed the guidelines.

Recommendations:

- Continue to monitor class size and caseload and add FTE as budget allows so that teachers have fewer students overall, can know them better, and can give feedback more quickly.
- Add a fourth team to grades 6, 7, 8 by the time the middle school moves to the new building.

Increasing Complexity of Student Needs

- We noted the challenges faced by educators at every grade level with students with increasingly complex social, emotional, and learning needs.
- There is a need for more resources so that classroom teachers can support the needs of all students in the classroom. At the elementary level this might take the form of classroom aides so that the teacher can assist students who missed instruction while they were out of the classroom to receive services.
- The district's special educators, school psychologists, and guidance counselors are also experiencing an increased caseload as a result of these student needs. Because the district does not have special education team chairs and only has one social worker/school adjustment counselor (currently at the middle school), our special educators, school psychologists, and guidance counselors end up fulfilling some of these duties.

Recommendations:

- Create a “class size feel” index based on complexity of student needs to balance individual classes and an educator’s caseload when possible.
- Hire classroom aides at the elementary so that the teacher can assist students who missed instruction while they are out of the classroom to receive services.
- Hire special education team chairs to oversee IEPs and better coordinate learning plans in support of classroom teachers and students.
- Hire more clinical staff (social workers, school adjustment counselors) to support students and consult with teachers to create the best learning experience for students.

Scheduling

- At the middle school, some class sizes are too high or too low due to scheduling challenges that result from sharing teachers with other schools. For example, there are music teachers that travel to elementary schools and/or the high school, which forces certain music classes to only be offered during the periods the teacher is available to be at the middle school, and has a negative impact on class size at other times of the day. Having a teacher available all day makes it possible to balance class sizes more evenly.
- At the middle and high school, there is limited flexibility for advisory, interventions (such as RtI), support, or directed study type programming. Adding this to the schedule would support all students better, especially those with special learning needs.
- The way intervention support for some academic areas at the high school is scheduled currently results in a de facto cohort of students with special learning needs in other classes.

Recommendations:

- With the reconfiguration of the district, schedules will be reviewed for high school, middle school, and upper elementary school. Committees doing this work should think creatively about ways the schedule can be designed to reduce class size and/or overall caseload per teacher.
- Consolidate traveling teachers to one building, when possible, to make it possible to schedule a class during any period of the day, which results in a more student-centered schedule. Hire additional FTE so that a teacher does not have to be shared by more than one building.
- Look at creation of a more flexible scheduling model for interventions, advisory, support, directed study type programming.