

Removing caps on class sizes is a failure of both education and economics ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It's hard not to be outraged by Ontario Education Minister Lisa Thompson's recent announcement that her government is considering removing the caps on the class size of kindergarten and primary grades.

Anyone who teaches or has children in a primary school understands the critical importance of the teacher-to-student ratio and many will contend that they are already way too high. The current cap on kindergarten classes in Ontario is 29 kids; for primary (Grades 1 to 3), it's 23.

A legion of arguments will be marshalled against the move. "In high school and university, pedagogy trumps class size," says Charles Pascal, professor of applied psychology and human development at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, a former deputy minister of education, and the architect of the province's early learning plan. He explains that in older years, creative teaching can overcome the challenge of a large class. "But in early childhood and primary education, that's just not the case. Kids have to feel successful and confident, and learning issues need to be identified. That's all based on a solid relationship with the teacher."

Failing to feel "successful and confident" can be devastating. Just ask my high-spirited son who spent much of his Grade 1 year at a desk in the hall, having been exiled there by a teacher who openly admitted to being overwhelmed by the challenge presented by the 23 kids in her class.

Unfortunately, such arguments will miss the mark, because the Ford government's latest swing of his deficit-slashing hatchet has nothing to do with education – and everything to do with the looming spring budget. If last fall's economic update is any indication, it promises to be an absurd spectacle in which a plucky Finance Minister rattles off a list of "efficiencies" while the gloating premier next to him tries to remember to repeat the chorus of "promise made, promise kept" after each item.

Lifting the cap would be all about dollars. So the obvious case to be made – that lifting caps will increase teacher-burnout and absenteeism, lower the level of instruction and possibly even jeopardize student safety – will land on deaf ears.

The good news is that there's also a strong economic argument to be made in favour of capping class size. The bad news is that it involves long-term thinking.

Success in the early years is a high predictor of later success in both school and life – this is the premise on which Ontario's full-day kindergarten program is based. The inverse is also true; a child who falls behind in the early years will require more remedial support as they proceed through the education system, is less likely to be a productive member of the work force and is ultimately more likely to rely on social services.

With luck, the Education Minister – who says she is "eager to hear the innovative ideas of educators and sector partners" – would look at some research on the subject, such as an exhaustive study published last year by the German Institute for Economic Research on the correlation between class size and student achievement. Analyzing the test results of 38,000 primary students across the country, the authors determined that children in classes with fewer than 20 students learn more, learn better and are less likely to fail (still an option in Germany) – and that the investment required to maintain this ratio more than pays off in the reduction of remedial supports and student's higher economic performance as adults.

Ms. Thompson doesn't need to consult German economists to know this; a visit to a kindergarten classroom in Ontario would be equally instructive. Let's say she visits one with the current full quotient of 29 students one of which – inevitably – has a bloody nose, two need to go to the bathroom, 10 are flipping through books on the carpet while two are ripping out pages, one is requesting assistance with the mastery of a capital G, another needs help with a glue lid and three are fighting over the dried macaroni. That would leave nine to talk with the minister about class size.

It's doubtful that the teacher would be available for comment. But Cathy Braden, a retired primary teacher who taught for 32 years with the Hamilton board, has time to reflect. Over e-mail, she writes, "Students who are lacking skills at the primary level need small groups or

one-on-one intervention. It's already a challenge with the class sizes we have now. Even the most effective teacher can't be effective. Bigger classes will just mean that fewer students succeed."

It's unfortunate to reduce kids to economic units, but that's the lens being applied by the current provincial government. It's both short-sighted and flawed. The educational case against the removal of caps is damning, but so too is the economic one.

Related link: Ratios/class sizes for four and five year olds in ECEC programs [3]

Region: Ontario [4]

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