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GETTING THE MOST FROM SCHOOL DISTRICT BUDGETS



FINDING POLITICALLY ACCEPTABLE WAYS TO INCREASE CLASS SIZE OR TEACHING LOAD: Freeing Up Funds for Strategic Priorities

Opportunity Brief • Getting Started • Lessons from the Field

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OPPORTUNITY BRIEF

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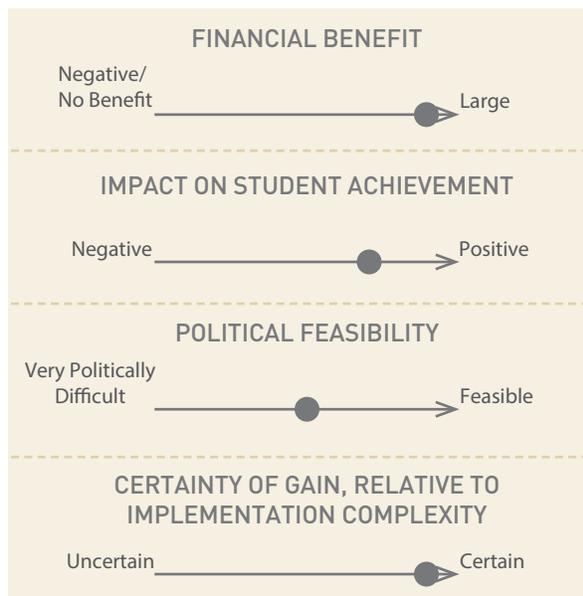
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Class size is perhaps the single largest driver of school spending, and small changes can have a huge impact on total spending. Increasing class size by two students, from 24 to 26 students for example, can free up to \$11 to \$20 million dollars in a typical district of 50,000 students. Nearly all district leaders wrestling with tight budgets are well aware of the impact class size has on spending, but they are also highly cognizant of how unpopular raising class size can be.

Class size matters far less than the public thinks. Yet, despite all the research, very few parents, teachers, principals, or school boards want to raise class size; in fact, their primary goal at budget time is often to reduce class size. At least 34 states have legislated class-size limits or provided incentives for class-size reductions.¹

Research on class size is unambiguous: the quality of classroom instruction matters far more than the number of students in the class. After being in small classes averaging 15 students for four years from kindergarten through third grade, these students

in the well-known Tennessee STAR program outperformed their classmates who had been in regular classes averaging 22 students by about 0.22 standard deviations, the equivalent of having received about three months more of schooling over the four years. This class-size effect was concentrated in the first year that students participated in the program and the positive effects were largest for black students, economically disadvantaged students, and boys.² The effectiveness of the teacher, however, had a dramatically greater impact: Tennessee students taught by the top 25% of teachers made 1.5 years of learning progress each year, three times the annual progress of students taught by teachers in



the bottom quartile.³ The research is clear: freeing up funds to improve teacher effectiveness or to expand the proportion of students taught by highly-effective teachers matters much more than class size.

Closely related but not identical to class size are the concepts of teaching load and student load. The former is the total number of class periods in a school day that a teacher spends teaching students; the latter is the total number of students for whom a teacher is responsible in a day or week. Much less research has been done on these elements of school organization, yet most districts have limits on both student load and teaching load that vary little, are not often examined, and seldom change. These limits, like those of class size, are held dear by most teachers, yet, like class size, they can dramatically affect resource allocation options.

Because teachers' salaries and benefits typically comprise 70% or more of a district's total budget, adding a single student to every secondary class in a typical school district of 50,000 students can produce savings of close to \$4 million. Since most secondary teachers teach five classes, if this were increased to six, the total savings could be up to \$20 million. Some of these savings can be reallocated to provide additional compensation for teachers with increased loads.

That said, savings are not the only reason to consider selectively raising class size and teaching loads: if the increases mean that more students are being taught by more effective teachers (and fewer are being taught by less effective teachers), then students benefit.

Similarly, students benefit if the funds saved are reallocated to implement or improve practices found to have substantial positive impact on teacher effectiveness (such as common planning time for teacher teams or high-quality mentoring and coaching) and/or on other practices shown to improve student learning (such as adding reading teachers, preserving high-quality art programs, or implementing strong tiered systems of academic or behavioral supports and intervention). Raising class size both to improve teacher effectiveness and to allow more students access to effective teachers can be a very high-impact use of limited resources.

Given the absence of evidence to support marginal reductions in class size or oppose marginal increases, and given the potential benefit that selectively raising class size and teaching load have for improving student learning, it is critical to explore ways to increase the appeal to teachers, parents, principals and other stakeholders of selectively raising class size and teacher

load. A number of strategies for increasing appeal and reducing resistance are emerging.

Create incentives for teachers to volunteer to teach larger classes

Teachers are often the first to resist having larger classes, and teacher resistance often influences and intensifies resistance from parents and principals. On the other hand, if a teacher wants to teach a larger class (or classes), parent and principal resistance fades. And if the teacher is known to be an effective teacher, resistance might turn to outright support.

1 Offer financial incentives

Offering to pay teachers more for volunteering to teach larger classes is a promising approach – one that can yield substantial savings and opportunities to reallocate resources to high-impact services and strategies.

For example, if a teacher is willing to increase his/her average class size from 24 to 28 students, the typical district could pay this teacher \$5,000 extra each year and still save or reallocate another \$7,500. This is a 10% net reduction in per pupil teaching cost, assuming that the average teacher earns \$75,000 with benefits.

Currently, few districts offer extra pay as an incentive for larger classes, but paradoxically, many offer extra pay as a penalty for larger classes. In states like Florida with tight class-size limits, or in districts that have collective bargaining

agreements that limit class size, there is often a financial penalty for exceeding the caps. The district must compensate the teachers who have oversized classes. In many situations, it is more cost-effective to increase class size and pay the penalty. Turning this rule on its head by asking teachers to volunteer for this extra pay turns a penalty into an incentive.

Another variant is to encourage secondary teachers to teach more periods a day. If just five teachers in a district each teach a sixth class, a sixth teacher need not be hired (Exhibit 1). The approximately \$75,000 saved would be available for extra pay for the teachers teaching an additional class, and would leave some funds to be reallocated. This idea might be appealing to teachers for a number of reasons. First, the extra compensation may seem very fair, since it represents an increase in salary roughly proportional to the increase in classes taught. Schools that have extended the school day have often found that this proportionality approach resonates with teachers.

**Larger class sizes
or student loads
can be made more
appealing when they
are a consequence
of an instructional
delivery model.**

Definitions: Student load and teaching load

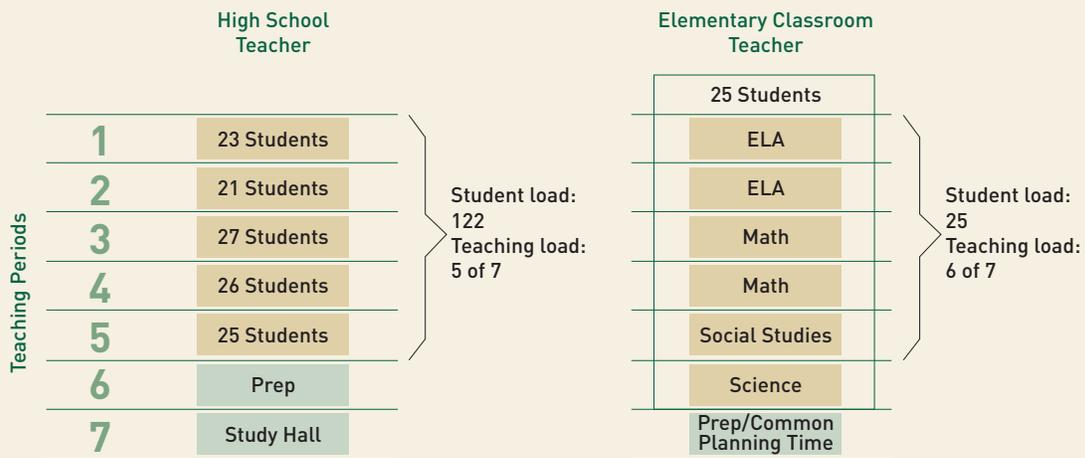
Student load is the total number of students for whom a teacher is responsible; it is closely associated with class size, but is not always the same. While a first grade teacher who teaches 25 first grade students has a student load of 25, a high school English teacher who teaches 5 classes, each with 25 students, has a student load of 125.

Typically, elementary art, music, and physical education specialists have dramatically higher student loads because they teach each student only once or twice each week; special educators and other support personnel typically have dramatically lower student loads because their class size is typically much lower, and some special educators teach the same students for more than one period a day.

Teaching load is the total number of class periods in a school day that a teacher spends teaching students; teaching load operates independently of class size, but can affect student load. In some schools, teaching load for some teaching positions can be as low as 40% of the school day.

In many districts, elementary teachers teach a higher proportion of the school day than secondary teachers. Often, the only time elementary teachers are not teaching their students is when their students are at lunch or at a specialist class (music, art, physical education). Secondary teachers, on the other hand, typically have one full period free for preparation each day and spend another period each day supervising students in the cafeteria or in study hall.

TEACHING LOAD VS. STUDENT LOAD



Additionally, since many younger teachers actually work second jobs, this can be more appealing to teachers than rushing off to a second employer.

As a sixth class, a teacher might be invited to teach an intervention class to which struggling students in his five other classes are assigned (this practice is often called “double time”). The teacher’s student load would not increase, and the teacher would have the opportunity for more time to support his struggling students.

2 Improve the odds and outcomes

The impact on student achievement will be dramatically increased if the opportunity to teach larger classes or more classes is offered only to teachers who have been identified as highly effective through the district’s evaluation system and student growth scores. The increased student load and teaching load is an acknowledgement of these teachers’ abilities,

Exhibit 1

TYPICAL TEACHER SCHEDULES					
Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
Class 1	Class 1	Class 1	Class 1	Class 1	Class 1
Class 2	Class 2	Class 2	Class 2	Class 2	Class 2
Class 3	Class 3	Class 3	Class 3	Class 3	Class 3
Class 4	Class 4	Class 4	Class 4	Class 4	Class 4
Class 5	Class 5	Class 5	Class 5	Class 5	Class 5

TEACHER SCHEDULES WITH INCREASED TEACHING LOAD					
Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
Class 1	Class 1	Class 1	Class 1	Class 1	Class 1
Class 2	Class 2	Class 2	Class 2	Class 2	Class 2
Class 3	Class 3	Class 3	Class 3	Class 3	Class 3
Class 4	Class 4	Class 4	Class 4	Class 4	Class 4
Class 5	Class 5	Class 5	Class 5	Class 5	Class 5
Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	

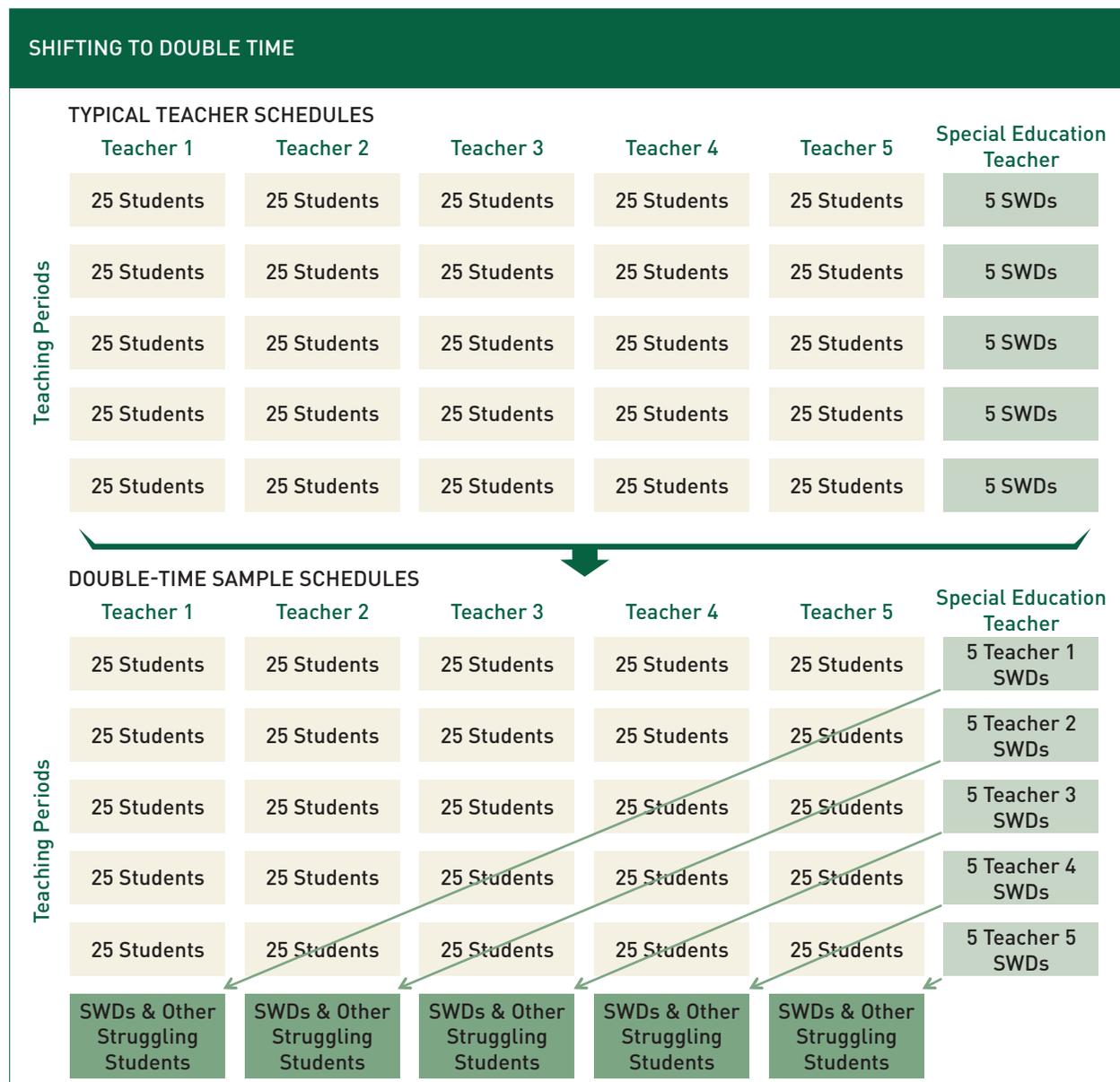
Source: The District Management Council

and is an opportunity to teach more and earn more. If parents know that the option of larger class size is only available to teachers identified as highly effective, then parent resistance is likely to also diminish. Many suburban schools have long, perhaps quietly, used such a strategy to get parents to accept otherwise less desirable options. It is common to see the “best” (a.k.a a very popular) teacher in a school become the first to pilot new ideas such as inclusion for students with significant special needs, multi-age classrooms, or to be the one to teach the class that must be bigger than the rest. Often, parents happily accept their child’s assignment when they know the teacher is strong. A way to make larger class size even more attractive to

parents is to offer parents the choice: just as highly-effective teachers can volunteer to “teach larger classes,” so, too, could parents be allowed to opt in.

Perhaps the “double time” model represents the ultimate win-win: students, teachers, and the budget all benefit. First a brief description of the double time model, which is sometimes called double-dipping, double-dosing, or core-plus-more. Regardless of the name, the idea is the same. Most secondary students receive, for example, one period of math and one period of English each day. Students who have disabilities or students who struggle and are at risk of dropping out often receive some form of extra help. This might take the form of a

Exhibit 2



Note: SWDs refers to students with disabilities

resource-room period each day with a special education teacher or a study-skills class or a homework-help class with an interventionist, most often a Title I tutor or special educator.

Double time replaces this extra help with a second period each day of either math or English taught by a regular math or English teacher (Exhibit 2). Some districts have seen big gains in student learning by shifting the extra help to general education teachers. Double time, unlike its alternatives, tightly connects the extra help to core instruction and provides a teacher with deep content expertise. Teachers will likely be pleased to have extra time each day with “their” struggling students. Finally, if each teacher who opts in to teach a sixth class teaches one double time class for students from their other five regular classes, they have not increased their student load while increasing their teaching load and increasing their compensation.

3 Adopt instructional delivery models that encourage larger class sizes or student loads

Larger class sizes or student loads can be made more appealing to both teachers and stakeholders when they are a consequence of an instructional delivery model that is likely to yield better student learning. Two such instructional delivery models hold promise:

- **Blended learning**

Blended learning combines independent and small-group, technology-supported learning with more traditional face-to-face teaching. While still in its infancy in public schools, blended learning can do one of two things. It can enable a “time-technology swap” in which students engage in digital learning for part of the day, often in substantially larger-than-typical classes supervised by paraprofessionals rather than classroom teachers. The time students spend in digital learning frees up time for highly-effective teachers to teach more students and expand their impact beyond what traditional approaches and schedules allow. It can also allow fewer teachers to reach the same number of students (Exhibit 3).

Besides the increasingly well-understood potential for individualization that digital learning can bring, digital learning can also bring greater equity and access. For example, advances in live, remote instruction can bring highly-effective teaching to urban schools and hard-to-reach rural schools that most need highly-effective teachers.

Effective blended learning is not easy. It requires careful planning, complex scheduling, carefully chosen and carefully used digital tools and assessments, and well-crafted, differentiated staffing roles. Yet, its promise of greater individualization, improved access

and equity, and improved outcomes and productivity is substantial.⁴

- **College-format, lecture-style classes at high school**

Another instructional delivery model that can be used at the high-school level to reduce costs, improve student readiness for college, take advantage of teacher expertise, and give more students access to highly-effective teaching is greater use of college-format, lecture-style classes. In these classes, some periods may have 100 or more students in a single class for a lecture, followed later in the week by smaller classes for discussion, review, and targeted help. At first blush, this might seem undesirable, but nearly all college freshmen will experience such classes. Students would develop skills and habits that will hold them in good stead when they face their first lecture courses in college. As some districts encourage students to take college classes during high school (so called dual-enrollment classes), they actually send students to large lecture/ small group courses away from school, but do not consider such formats under their own roof.

Exhibit 3

TRADITIONAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SCHEDULE				
	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4
Periods	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
BLENDED LEARNING MODEL EXAMPLE				
	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4
Periods	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Learning Lab
	Teacher A	Learning Lab	Teacher B	Teacher C
	Teacher B	Teacher A	Learning Lab	Teacher C
	Learning Lab	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C

Source: Adapted from draft of “Innovating Toward Sustainability: How Computer Labs Can Enable New Staffing Structures, and New Savings” by Suzanne Simburg and Marguerite Roza, 2012.

Courses such as biology, U.S. History, and American literature could be good candidates for this format. A high school can challenge its most gifted presenter to design the lecture series. The teacher might use the auditorium and have access to first-rate presentation technology and software, including such tools as electronic “clickers” that make it possible for the teacher to pose questions, display student responses, and monitor individual student engagement. The lecture can be recorded for use by absent students and reviewed later by students and discussion leaders.

The financial impact (as well as the learning benefits) can be meaningful. Let us look at just one popular course offering: junior-year U.S. History. A 4,000-student high school with 1,000 juniors and an average class size for social studies of 25 requires 40 sections of U.S. History taught by eight full-time teachers. Often, scheduling limitations require more than eight social studies teachers to cover the 40 sections. Some teachers might teach five sections of the course, while others might just teach one or two, and fill the rest of their teaching schedule by teaching with other social studies classes. Those teaching only one or two sections often have neither the time nor expertise to make the ongoing improvements to the curriculum and to their instruction to ensure a highly engaging and effective learning experience for students. Reducing the number of staff needed to teach a given course can thus also increase the quality of the instruction, as well as reduce the cost. This is doubly true when only highly-effective teachers are asked to lead the large sections.

Here is what a college-style delivery format might look like:

For students:

- Students attend three lectures each week with 250 other students.
- For the two other periods each week, students participate in a discussion, follow-up, and homework review session with approximately 25 students. These sessions are led by the lecturer or another U.S. History teacher.

For teachers:

- A master teacher delivers the lecture with two other U.S. history teachers attending to ensure continuity of content and to provide professional development.
- The lecturer and other U.S. History teachers also lead discussion sessions.
- The lecturer and other U.S. History teachers meet together twice each week during extra-planning periods to examine student performance data, adjust instruction, and plan discussion sessions.

Great Digital Instruction

Public Impact, an education think tank, highlights that blended learning is not a strategy designed to reduce the importance of teachers; instead, it can be a strategy designed to enhance the role of highly-effective teachers. To that end, it has spotlighted seven characteristics of effective digital instruction, all of which “allow digital instruction to save teachers time that they can reinvest in deeper learning, differentiated in-person instruction, and team collaboration:

Alignment: Aligns units of instruction with the school’s curriculum, below and above grade-level standards

Advancement: Allows advancement at a personalized pace, with students able to autonomously advance or repeat lessons until a topic is mastered

Assessment: Includes frequent assessment of mastery and reports of individual and group learning trends that teachers can use to monitor student learning and inform instruction

Advice: Recommends next instructional steps for each student and groups of students, including in-person and digital follow-up

Accessibility: Accessible to all students who have access to software, hardware, and Internet connections

Application: Includes analytical, creative, and conceptual thinking units to apply knowledge and skills

Accountability: Monitors digital instruction effectiveness with different students and makes changes or prompts teachers when changes are needed.”¹

¹ “A Better Blend: A Vision for Boosting Student Outcomes with Digital Learning,” Public Impact. http://opportunityculture.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/04/A_Better_Blend_A_Vision_for_Boosting_Student_Outcomes_with_Digital_Learning-Public_Impact.pdf (accessed May 31, 2013).

From a productivity perspective, this plan requires 4.8 FTE compared to the traditional delivery method, which required 8.0 FTE; this represents a 40% reduction. More importantly, students are gaining access to exceptional teaching that is regularly strengthened by collaboration among a core group of teachers. For teachers, this provides a strong teamwork environment and embedded professional development through observing a highly-effective teacher and planning as a team.

Change the structure of teaching and class assignments

The traditional model in most schools, kindergarten through fifth or sixth grade, is to have one teacher, sometimes supported by a part- or full-time paraprofessional, for each group of approximately 25 students. A typical 600-student K-5 school might have four classrooms at each grade level, each with 25 students and one teacher, and perhaps a paraprofessional shared among some or all four classrooms. This familiar set-up has hardly changed in generations, except perhaps by the addition of a paraprofessional.

That is an expensive model, and one that assumes every teacher is equally effective and will be effective working mostly in isolation. It also assumes that districts will have ever-increasing revenue, thus eliminating the need to manage productivity or class size.

Some districts are beginning to try new models of teaching and class assignments that are designed to take full advantage of the strengths of the district’s most effective teachers and to better develop novice teachers. In this emerging model, both class size and average student load also rise, but teachers, parents, and students can all benefit, thus reducing pushback.

At the heart of this new elementary teaching model is a shift away from assigning a room full of students to an individual teacher to having a team of teachers work collectively and flexibly with many students. For example, in a school with 100 first graders, the traditional staffing model would be four teachers each with 25 students, and likely a paraprofessional in at least one class to support a few students with disabilities and/or English language learners.

In the new model, all 100 students would be assigned to a team of three teachers and one or more assistants. Most importantly, the team has a clear leader, the master teacher, who is proven to be a highly-effective teacher and is charged with the ultimate responsibility for all 100 students’ learning. The master teacher directs the grouping and instruction across all 100 students so that all 100 students benefit from the expertise of the master teacher.

In addition, the master teacher is responsible for developing the skills of her/his teammate teachers. Instead of hiring paraprofessionals as assistants, hiring full-time paid student teachers may provide a way to groom future talent.

Schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) and Metropolitan

Nashville Public Schools (TN) are working with the non-profit Public Impact to develop this model. Four schools in West Charlotte (NC), for example, launched in fall 2013 new models built on these principles. The district had 708 applicants for the new positions in the spring of 2013, roughly half from within the district and half from outside the district and/or state.⁴

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools is an example of a district that has developed a job description for a paid, full-time student teacher who can learn and work in the team environment. Its compensation totaling approximately \$15,000 is enabling them to attract highly promising candidates: there were 100 applicants in the first three weeks of posting the positions.

While this strategy is potentially a big step forward in putting more students in front of highly-effective teachers and in building a stronger system of developing teachers, it is also a way of increasing class size without the usual resistance. Because students are grouped and regrouped throughout the day, the model changes the very idea of class size. Perhaps 100 students will be together for morning announcements, 50 for listening to a story, 34 for some instruction, and five or six in small groups with staff circulating.

As the example below shows, costs can drop by 10%, while paying highly-effective staff more and providing far more support to new and developing teachers. Since this model

Exhibit 4

COST COMPARISON OF TRADITIONAL AND TEAM STAFFING		
	Traditional Staffing	Team Staffing
Students	100	100
Staffing		
Master teacher		\$75,000
Teacher A	\$50,000	\$50,000
Teacher B	\$50,000	\$50,000
Teacher C	\$50,000	
Teacher D	\$50,000	
Para	\$15,000	\$15,000
Student Teacher		\$15,000
Benefits	\$80,000	\$60,000
Total	\$295,000	\$265,000

Source: The District Management Council, based on a real district example

provides round-the-clock professional development and coaching, other professional development costs might be reduced as well, so that the savings could approach 15-20% or more (Exhibit 4).

Several of the models being developed in Charlotte (NC) and elsewhere make use of blended learning, which they see as a perfect complement for the team structure – and possibly essential to its success. Public Impact describes it as a “better blend.”

Judo, not karate

A key element of judo is to use the opponent’s weight and momentum to your advantage; karate, by contrast, tends to rely more on blocking and forcefully attacking. It seems that many past efforts to raise class size have been frontal assaults (backed by good data) on stakeholders who just do not want more students in a class. As budgets tighten and as highly-effective teachers are more easily identified through data-driven evaluation systems, districts can take a page from judo’s playbook. Crafting plans to raise class size, student load, and teaching load that generate support rather than pushback will serve students and the budget well.

¹ Education Week, “Setting Class-Size Limits,” http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/infographics/13class_size_map.html (accessed May 30, 2013).

² Matthew M. Chingos and Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst, “Class Size: What Research Says and What It Means for State Policy,” Brookings Institution, May 11, 2011, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2011/0511_class_size_whitehurst_chingos/0511_class_size_whitehurst_chingos.pdf.

³ William L. Sanders & June C. Rivers, J. C., Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement, University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, November 1996. Retrieved from http://www.cgp.upenn.edu/pdf/Sanders_Rivers-TVASS_teacher%20effects.pdf

⁴For more information on Public Impact’s district partnerships visit <http://opportunityculture.org/>.

GETTING STARTED

FINDING POLITICALLY ACCEPTABLE WAYS TO INCREASE CLASS SIZE OR TEACHING LOAD:

Freeing Up Funds for Strategic Priorities

Despite research that shows the relatively small impact of class size on student learning, the suggestion of increasing class size can ignite significant teacher, principal, and parent pushback. Given the substantial potential to free up funds for strategic priorities, strategies for increasing the appeal and reducing the resistance are often worth the effort.

HERE'S HOW TO GET STARTED:

- 1 **AVOID RIGID CAPS ON CLASS SIZE**
Many districts have class size targets that have become de facto caps. Developing broader guidelines and a range of acceptable class sizes increase stakeholder comfort with class-size variation and make it easier to change class sizes in the future.
- 2 **STOP TALKING ABOUT “CLASS SIZE”**
In many districts, “class size” is a third rail, not to be talked about in polite company. It is easier to overcome political pushback and resistance if the conversation is centered on expanding the reach of effective teachers or highlighting the other reforms that modest class-size increases afford. Even a focus on adult-to-student ratios, instead of class size, can help ease the conversation.
- 3 **GET TEACHERS ON BOARD BY PROVIDING INCENTIVES**
If a teacher wants to teach larger classes, parent and principal resistance often fades. Strategies such as providing additional compensation for teaching larger classes or having bigger teaching loads, making teaching bigger classes voluntary instead of required, or making teaching bigger classes part of a teacher career path can help win teacher support.
- 4 **CHANGE THE INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY MODEL AS WELL AS CLASS SIZE**
Larger class sizes or student loads can be made more appealing when they are a consequence of an instructional delivery model that is likely to yield better student learning. Blended learning and college-style lecture classes at the high school level, or linking larger classes to teachers of proven effectiveness are new instructional delivery models that are good for the budget and, likely, good for students.
- 5 **INCREASE STUDENT LOAD FOR HIGHLY-EFFECTIVE TEACHERS**
A new approach groups many students, say 100 students, to a group of teachers, perhaps three teachers and an aide. In this model, one of the teachers is a master teacher, who is paid more and takes responsibility for developing and coaching the other teachers and assistants.

A word to the wise: DO NOT BOTHER TRYING TO CONVINCe SKEPTICS WITH RESEARCH

Research has shown that in most cases, increasing class size by a few students will not negatively impact student learning. While the research is very solid, it has failed to convince many parents, teachers, and principals. Reiterating the findings seldom garners many converts. Instead, starting the conversation with in-district data – or changing the conversation entirely – can be more effective.



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As districts seek to balance tight budgets and invest in strategic priorities such as instructional coaching, professional development, early literacy or other high-impact levers for raising achievement, they must look to shift existing funds to these new uses. District leaders know well that small increases in class size can free up significant dollars. All too often, however, this option is quickly dismissed due to the substantial pushback that comes with most discussions of raising class size. Fortunately, some districts have found ways to minimize the resistance or even make larger class sizes popular.

Some districts are turning larger class size into a high-impact reform strategy in and of itself.

Lessons from the field

LESSON 1 Stop trying to convince skeptics with research data

LESSON 2 Win the support of teachers and others will follow

LESSON 3 Reframe the discussion away from larger class size

LESSON 4 Create a culture that is comfortable with variation in class size

This is no small matter, since increasing the average class size by just two students in a typical district of 50,000 students can free up approximately \$11 to \$20 million a year or more. Some districts have moved beyond increasing class size solely for the financial savings, and are turning larger class size into a high-impact reform strategy in and of itself.

These districts are placing more students in classrooms of highly-effective teachers and using these larger classes as the foundation for a comprehensive redesign of the role of the teacher. This is a newly emerging area, and the first pioneers have learned some valuable lessons.

LESSON

1

Stop trying to convince skeptics with research data

In an effort to fund more effective reforms, advocates of larger classes often point to research as compelling proof that in most cases, adding a few students to a typical class will not hurt learning. While the research is very solid, it has failed to convince many parents, teachers, and principals. Reiterating the findings seldom garners many converts.

Some districts have more effectively changed opinion by collecting and sharing district-specific data to make the point. One large, urban district, for example, widely shared data from its own schools demonstrating that the effectiveness of the teacher in the room, not how many children were in the room, correlated highly to student achievement. Another district used an independent outside evaluator to show that despite its higher-than-average class sizes, the district was outperforming similar districts.

LESSON

2

Win the support of teachers and others will follow

Districts that have raised class size without significant resistance have made concerted, comprehensive efforts to turn teachers into advocates, not reluctant participants. They recognized that if the teachers are onboard, their enthusiasm will win over parents and principals. National research suggests that on the whole, teachers have complex feelings about class size. Within limits, teachers seem to view whatever class size they are used to as acceptable, but they regard even a small increase as problematic. This is equally true whether the district typically has 21 students per class or 29. This comfort with the familiar suggests that as districts take advantage of opportunities to raise class size, the larger classes will, in time, feel like the new normal and will be accepted as reasonable.

Districts have taken a number of routes to win teacher support for larger classes:

- **Provide additional compensation for larger classes or bigger teaching loads, but on a volunteer-only basis**

Staff who find the idea of larger classes or bigger teaching loads unattractive or even unacceptable are not forced into opposition as it is on a volunteer basis. And, many teachers, especially younger teachers who work second jobs, prefer the opportunity to earn more by adding responsibilities to their first job. In some cases, districts can use existing funds for compensation since many collective bargaining contracts include that a penalty be paid to teachers who are forced to have classes above a certain size. By seeking

volunteers, a fine can be converted to a reward.

- **Link larger classes to effective teachers**

Some districts limit the pool of potential volunteers for larger classes to only highly-effective teachers. Many teachers and most unions seem uncomfortable with performance-based pay *per se*, but extra pay for extra work (even if limited to high-performing teachers) seems to be politically more acceptable in some districts than straight “pay for performance.”

Linking class-size increases to only highly-effective teachers also wins over many parents. When parents can be certain that having a child in a larger-than-average class assures them of a highly-effective teacher, they often lobby for the bigger class. To eliminate push-back, some districts allow families to opt in or out of the larger classes, and have found that few parents refuse the opportunity to place their child with a teacher who is proven to be effective. It may be that many parents do believe the research that the teacher matters more than class size. Perhaps guaranteeing that their child will have a highly-effective teacher allows them to shed their fear of larger class size.

- **Make bigger classes part of a teacher career path**

One of the most comprehensive approaches to winning teacher support for larger classes is project LIFT, currently underway in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools (CMS). CMS leaders adopted the concept of seeking volunteers from a pool of their most effective teachers to teach larger classes for extra pay; to this, they added a significant career ladder component as well.

There are few options for promotion in most schools. For a teacher, the typical move up is to become an assistant principal or perhaps an instructional coach. Neither may be appealing to someone who wants to continue working with students. To tackle this problem, CMS drew on the guidance of Public Impact to establish a new job design linking top teachers to larger class sizes.¹ A teacher with proven results is promoted to master teacher; the master teacher both teaches classes and oversees two or three other teachers, and gets paid substantially more. The higher pay is sustainable because the average class size of the group of teachers is larger. Linking the extra pay to more responsibility and an active role in developing and leading other teachers has been very well-received, even though class sizes increased by a healthy dose. In fact, CMS had about 30 applicants for each position in previously hard-to-staff schools. Interestingly, some of

the applicants were members of the staff who had been promoted out of the classroom, but who saw this as an opportunity to return to teaching without giving up a sense of advancement.

LESSON
3

Reframe the discussion away from larger class size

Districts that have raised class size have typically done so by reframing the discussion completely. In effective messaging, larger classes are never the goal; they are the means to an end, freeing up funds for something that is good for students.

- **Frame the goal as expanding the reach of highly-effective teachers**

Some districts have placed their emphasis on putting more children in front of highly-effective teachers. This positioning draws on the research that “teachers matter most,” which is more widely accepted than “class size doesn’t matter much.”

- **Frame larger class sizes as part of a larger reform agenda**

Directly linking larger classes to other strategies or benefits has been a winning message in a number of districts. One district first sought support for an extended school day and extensive instructional coaching. With many wanting such reforms, it was easier to then move to slightly larger classes to fund these sought-after changes. Larger classes were the means to a highly desirable end.

This approach contrasts greatly with those districts that first identify the need for larger class size to balance the budget, and justify (accurately) that this is a reasonable student-centered response to declining resources because it will enable the district to preserve services essential to their success. While reasonable, this approach positions larger classes as less bad than the alternative. It is a necessary evil, but not a good thing, which seldom garners much enthusiasm.

Presenting larger classes as part of a comprehensive reform is also effective in garnering support. Some districts have made larger class size just a footnote in a very comprehensive redesign plan. Having larger classes with highly-effective teachers is just a piece of the reform which includes initiatives regarding blended learning, common planning time, career ladder, teacher development, recognition, extra pay, and promotion.

- **Focus on adult-to-student ratios, not class size**

Still another strategy involves shifting the conversation away from class size, which measures the number

of students per classroom teacher, to the number of students per adult. This latter ratio considers the number of all staff supporting students. Given that roughly half the adults in a typical school are not classroom teachers, this alternative measure can be a very reasonable gauge of support. A co-taught classroom of 28 students with one general education teacher and one special education teacher may seem large, but when presented as 14 students per teacher, it does not seem so overwhelming.

Beyond acknowledging the extra staff in many classrooms, focusing on student-to-adult ratios also encourages much of the instructional flexibility and personalization that smaller class size is often intended to create. When a school adds reading teachers, coaches, or behaviorists with the funds it has saved by increasing class size, it has actually held constant the schoolwide adult-to-student ratio. This change does not have to feel like a negative change any more. Getting a community to shift its focus from class size to adult-to-student ratio takes time and consistent messaging, but districts that have persisted have been able to get their communities to embrace the concept, and in turn, support larger class sizes.

LESSON
4

Create a culture that is comfortable with variation in class size

Districts that have raised class size successfully typically get teachers and parents comfortable with variation in class size. Establishing a context for variation in class size can help a district raise overall average class size with no formal change to policy.

- **Avoid creating a visible, high-stakes, class-size cap**

Typically, districts establish class-size guidelines in response to the priority many parents, teachers and principals place on small classes. In some cases, school boards adopt policies that cap class size, especially in elementary schools. If they want to ensure their administrators have some flexibility, they set “targets” or “guidelines” rather than hard and fast maximums. Yet often those “targets” and “guidelines” become de facto caps in the minds of stakeholders, and any attempt to change the number can create a high-stakes, often bruising public debate. Developing broad “targets” and “guidelines” and building stakeholder comfort with variation makes it easier to change class sizes.

- **Embrace variation itself**

Some districts avoid a fixed class-size target altogether by embracing variation and rejecting a

“one size fits all” approach to class size. This concept fits well with both principal autonomy and weighted student funding (WSF) theories of action. Under these models, individual schools are expected to customize staffing based on student need and school-based plans. One school might opt for larger classes in exchange for more reading teachers or social workers, for example. In a district that has different strategies and class sizes from school to school, it is much less newsworthy when some class sizes increase.

A related approach is to have many different targets. Some districts have different targets by grade or by subject. Some explicitly vary class size based on whether a teacher is new (warranting smaller class size) or whether a teacher is proven highly-effective (warranting a larger class size).

At the elementary level especially, another way to take the focus off a single hard-to-change class-size target is to change class size during the day through flexible grouping. In this model, 100 students might be assigned to four first grade homerooms, but then 30 students across all four classes may go with teacher A for an hour, 30 students with teacher B, and 40 to a computer lab with teacher C. The fourth teacher is then free to take on another role such as serving as an instructional coach.

- **Frame variation as an issue of equity**

Based in large part on the success of Montgomery County Public Schools’s (MD) strategy of differentiating resources between high- and low-poverty schools, some districts embrace variability in class size as an equity issue. They acknowledge different needs and thus staff differently. Some districts reduce class size in high-poverty schools. Others actually keep class sizes small in more affluent communities where parent preference for small classes is strong; in high-poverty schools, class size is slightly increased in order to bolster staffing for more intervention and social/emotional support.

- **Respond to variation with flexibility**

Still another strategy for getting a community and staff to accept larger class sizes is to accept that not everyone will, and to build in quick-response options. Some districts keep a few teaching positions in reserve to address a few school-specific concerns, rather than make global changes to their strategy. One district linked raising average elementary class sizes with the addition of a cadre of part-time, retired master teachers supporting classrooms during core instructional blocks. The community reacted favorably knowing that additional expert staff was available during part of the day; for the district, it was financially viable because the cost of stipends was far less than the cost of full-time teaching positions with benefits. The cadre of retired master teachers also made possible job-embedded coaching from experienced, effective teachers.

Worth the effort

Raising class size is never easy, but given its significant impact on budget and its limited adverse impact on student achievement, it is an important lever for managing resources astutely. Establishing a context for variation in class size can help a district raise overall average class size with little or no formal change to policy. A slow, thoughtful approach to win the support of teachers and to acknowledge parent concerns has helped some urban districts narrow their budget gaps as well as their achievement gaps.

¹Public Impact has developed resources to support districts seeking to redesign school design and staffing to “extend the reach of excellent teachers and their teams” through what it calls an “Opportunity Culture”. For details, visit Public Impact’s website at <http://publicimpact.com>.

SPENDING MONEY WISELY

Getting the Most from School District Budgets

This chapter is from *Spending Money Wisely: Getting the Most from School District Budgets* by Nathan Levenson, Karla Baehr, James C. Smith, and Claire Sullivan of The District Management Council. To access this chapter and the rest of the series, please go to www.dmcouncil.org. Topics in this series include:

1. **Calculating Academic Return on Investment: A Powerful Tool and a Great Investment**
2. **Managing to Existing Class-Size Targets: Systems and Tools to Staff More Closely to Current Policy**
3. **Adding Precision to Remediation and Intervention Staffing Levels: Data-Driven Guidelines Improve Schedules, Building Assignments, and Workload**
4. **Finding Politically Acceptable Ways to Increase Class Size or Teaching Load: Freeing up Funds for Strategic Priorities**
5. **Strategically Spending Federal Entitlement Grants: Making the Connection to District Priorities**
6. **Ensuring More Students Read on Grade Level: Cost-Effective Strategies**
7. **Improving the Cost-Effectiveness of Professional Development: Reducing Expenses While Increasing Impact**
8. **Rethinking Purchasing: A Strategic Approach to Increasing the Value of Each Dollar Spent**
9. **Lowering the Cost of Extended Learning Time: Creating Financial Sustainability**
10. **Targeting New Investments: Funding a Better Future Despite Declining Resources**

About the Authors

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About the District Management Council

The District Management Council (DMC) partners with public school district leaders to help improve student outcomes, operational efficiency, and resource allocation. DMC was founded in 2004 to address the most pressing and important management challenges facing American educators. The trusted advisor to school district leaders, DMC works with districts on these important issues to achieve measurable results. With the firm belief that leadership and management matter, DMC helps to strengthen and increase the managerial capacity of the people leading school districts to systemically improve the performance of the American public education system. To learn more, visit www.dmcouncil.org.

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