



Date: February 23, 2015
To: House Education Committee, Chair Doherty and Members
From: Laurie Wimmer, OEA Government Relations
Re: *HB 2928 [Class Size Task Force]*

On behalf of OEA's 42,000 members, it is my honor to testify in favor of HB 2928, to spotlight the long-researched issue of class size appropriateness for our students. Because Oregon has such high class sizes – among the most populated in the country – we have long had a keen interest in bringing the numbers down to enhance educational quality for our students. In past sessions, we have explored the idea of making class size a mandatory subject of bargaining, we have explored class size caps, and we were successful in 2013 in passing a law (HB 2644) to ensure an accurate and actual count of students to teachers in Oregon's core classrooms.

Oregon's dramatically overcrowded classrooms are known to us because parents and teachers report the anecdotes. They are concerned about the students in grade schools who are overwhelmed and act out. They are concerned that providing individual attention is becoming impossible. They are concerned that grading and commenting on English papers is a thing of the past. They are worried about the students too intimidated by the huge class sizes to ask a question when they don't understand a concept. They are worried about student safety.

Because of the complexity of this subject, and perhaps harkening back to my long-ago journalism training, I thought the best way to discuss this concept would be to consider the "who, what, when, where, why and how" of class size.

First, the "who". As it stands now, class size is determined by school districts individually as a part of their budgets and budget-driven policy decisions. In times of shortfall, excruciating decisions often have to be made: do we cut days or teachers or programs? Usually, it is a mix of all three. When staffing levels dropped by more than 5,000 in the most recent recession, class sizes swelled in districts large and small. Class size research was considered by the Quality Education Commission in setting its initial model or "prototype" schools concept, and in 2014, this recommended level was updated as part of its costing methodology.

The "what" of class size is about definitions. According to the research, confusion exists about how to understand "class size". As the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research put it:

"People have been discussing the benefits of class size reduction programs for many years. Such programs are credited with improving the achievement of students in the early grades and in particular those considered to be at risk. Unfortunately, people often mean different things when they use the term *class size reduction*. Some define it as a reduction in the **average**

number of students per teacher school wide. Others say it means **a reduction in the number of students in a particular classroom.**

Class size reduction programs are popular with the public. In the last 10 years, 40 states have implemented such programs. Class size reduction seems to enhance the social experiences of both teachers and students. Teachers who are effective with small classes know how to individualize teaching. They have clear expectations, they are less distracted by discipline problems, and they balance teacher-directed and child-centered teaching. Terminology is used loosely in some research, too. Some researchers conflate three related but distinct terms: *class size reduction, pupil-teacher ratio, and class size.*”

“When” class size reduction should be the state’s goal is a harder question to answer, because of the obvious tradeoffs inherent in making the significant investment required to buy down class sizes by even a few students. When does such a large investment – one that makes the QEM target for optimal funding as high as it is – make sense? Our students deserve that answer to be “now”, but a serious conversation about resource adequacy must be paired with initiatives to solve this problem, and for it to be done correctly.

And that brings us to the questions “where” and “how”. In California, a class-size reduction plan that has been characterized as a “political” means of reducing the ratios of students to teachers was enacted. In Tennessee, the “Stars” program of targeted, research-enabled class-size reduction was implemented with far greater impact. Moving carefully to ensure that a qualified educator leads every classroom, and that limited resources are deployed first to the highest-priority, greatest needs are sound methods, according to the research, of improving students’ experience in schools.

It is our hope that HB 2928 is enacted, so that the 15-member Task Force is able to build on the important work of others, both in Oregon and elsewhere, who have examined the issues of ratios, size, cost, and methodology of class size reduction. We at OEA look forward to assisting the legislature and this committee with its critical work.

Thank you.