

My name is Maureen Barnhart. I have been a member of the Hillsboro Education Association bargaining team for several contracts since 1996, I have taught in elementary grades, the alternative middle school program, and I am currently a fourth grade teacher.

In surveying staff to determine the more significant concerns regarding our classroom and school environments, the issue of class size has increasingly shown itself to be a more urgent issue. There are the simple facts of the decreased attention to and time given to individuals and small groups of students and the increased workload in planning our classes. But there is also the impact on how we are changing our practices to better serve our students:

Equal access to education for all of our students in an ongoing conversation in education. To ensure this right, the Hillsboro School District is working toward full inclusion: all students receive as much education as possible in the classroom, where they can be a part of deeper conversations and discourse around a topic or concept.

It is the right thing to do, but implementation is seriously hampered when the educator is placed in the position of working with large numbers of students. In any given class of 26 to 35 elementary students are the groups with which we have normally worked, such as children on 504 plans, children on Individualized Education Plans (to improve their academics), children who are advanced (“Talented and Gifted”). All of these groups deserve to continue to be engaged in learning, and we have learned much about curriculum differentiation. In Hillsboro, in the secondary classrooms, the average class sizes are even larger.

We have come to the realization that inclusion is also the right of our students who are impacted by emotional and mental health needs, who fall into the autism spectrum, and who suffer from adverse childhood experiences (currently also referred to as “ACE” children and whose experiences keep them from comfortably moving through the social and academic behaviors normally found in schools. Counselors and other staff find themselves supporting those conversations that help all of us navigate respect and positive social interactions, and to maintain a safe environment.

To keep students for whom English is not the primary language is segregation, nor is it an effective process for language development and cultural inclusion.

When we have a large number of students in a classroom, it is easy for the children who are working on socialization to become victims or bullies of their peers. It is too easy for them to fall behind in learning. When we have students suffering from mental illness, it is imperative that we are helping them learn appropriate interactions. It is also imperative that their peers learn how to interact with these students, and to learn what triggers antisocial behavior and how to prevent that behavior.

At the beginning of the 2016-17 school year, Hillsboro Superintendent Mike Scott told us that we were to make it a priority to develop positive relationships with our students. He told us that this goal is more significant than meeting all of the Common Core State Standard goals. However, we still set an average class size for elementary and secondary, no matter what the mix of students. And, as Superintendent Scott notes, our students don’t come in handy batches of 30 4th graders, so the “average” is often not a good descriptor of real class sizes. Legislation allowing us to have those conversations about class size could bring some differentiation and direction of resources to this very important issue.