

Hello, my name is Tina Lamanna and I teach second grade at Markham Elementary School in Portland Public Schools. I actually feel very fortunate compared to colleagues around the state because I “only” have 26 students. Still, though, I got a glimpse recently of how much better it could be, and that’s the story I want to share with you.

So on this particular day a couple of weeks ago, a bunch of my students were pulled out of class for an hour or so to be tested for the TAG program. Between that and a few students being absent that day, I had about an hour when I had only 17 kids in class.

So, you know that feeling when you’ve been clomping around in heavy boots all day, and they’re weighing you down, but you get used to it and stop noticing—until you take the boots off at the end of the day, and you can’t believe how light you feel and how easy everything is? That’s how this felt. I hadn’t even noticed how hard I’d been working just to tread water, just to make sure all the fires got put out—until all of a sudden some of the weight was lifted and I could just teach.

We were working on writing during this time, and writing can be really challenging for a lot of students: It’s open-ended, it can be hard to get started, and sometimes kids choose to find less productive ways to spend their time. However, on this one day, I was able to check in with each kid who was having trouble, and I was able to actually sit with them, help talk them through what they were writing, and get them to a place where they were able to keep going on their own. I had time to sit with other students who weren’t having trouble and help them make their writing better by deciding where to put punctuation, or cut extraneous details out of their stories, or identify places where they needed to add more information. During all this time, students were focused on getting their work done instead of distracted by classmates or their own self-doubt, and the quality of the writing they produced really showed the difference.

For the first time this school year, I felt like I was able to stop putting out fires and actually teach. I felt like I was finally able to give my students the time and individualized attention they need and deserve.

My students, or at least two thirds of them, got that for one hour this school year. That might be the only hour this year, or maybe ever, when they’ll be in such a small class. Can you imagine what they could achieve if they were able to go to school in an environment like that all day, every day, from kindergarten all the way through to 12th grade? With smaller class sizes, I think that we as educators could do more to pull up kids who are on the cusp of failing, to help high achievers realize their full potential instead of letting them coast, and to catch kids before they fell through the cracks. We could begin to address some of the massive social and emotional needs that so many of our traumatized students are bringing to school with them. We could create a school system where everyone got their needs met. I’m asking you to imagine that with me, and then please do everything in your power to make it happen. Thank you.