

Good Afternoon Chair Wagner and the Senate Education Committee.

My name is Celeste Pellicci and I have been a 6th-8th grade science and health teacher at Kraxberger Middle School for the past 15 years. We are part of the 3,000-student Gladstone School District.

In my time at Kraxberger, I have seen my class sizes rise from the mid-twenties to close to 40 since the recession. I have gathered stories from my school to share with you.

PE - Our school designs the schedule so that class in PE are very large so that other core classes can be smaller. As a result, there are 100 6th graders in a class with two PE teachers. This is dangerous and a liability for the district. Students have been injured in these classes, and the district is at risk of being sued. Also, by the time attendance is taken, there's not much time for movement.

Band - We have only one band teacher for the District. He spends half his day at the middle school and half at the high school. His 6th grade band, the first year they can have band in our district, was capped at 70 students. There were more kids that wanted to have band. He is trying to teach 70 11- and 12-year-olds to play instruments for the first time. How much attention can he give each of them? Not much. But accepting this many students into this class is the only way he can build his future band program. If we had a full-time band teacher in each school, he could have multiple 6th grade band classes and spend more time teaching the kids to play.

Science - I taught five classes and all 180 of the 8th graders. I am going to be honest. With my classes ranging from 30-38 kids, I did fewer labs and more computer-based work. It was too scary to have that many kids moving around and working with chemicals and other supplies. I also stopped giving essay questions on tests. With a finite amount of time in the day to work, I chose to focus on planning engaging lessons. With a finite amount of energy to give, I focused my energy to developing relationships. Large class sizes force me to make choices that do not benefit kids. I have to choose between what's doing right for them, and my own mental and physical health.

Math - Because of our low test scores in math, more staffing was added to math to bring down class size. But because these classes were smaller, others were larger because the district isn't able to add staff with the resources we have. So while a math teacher had 100 kids during the day, the language arts teacher had 170 kids in the day. This inequality is tough for a couple of reasons-- language arts teachers arguably have a larger workload because they are responsible for reading student's writing and giving constructive feedback, which takes a significant amount of time.

Language Arts - One of the most important skills taught in language arts is writing. To improve students' writing, teachers must give meaningful feedback at multiple steps in the writing process. Our language arts teachers have 170 kids every day. On a single day, students turn in 170 papers. It is not possible to conference with every student in a class period, let alone while managing a group of 34 students, some of who need substantial help. Peer editing is great but is not a substitute for teacher feedback.

Disruption - Large classes sizes significantly impact the behavior of the class. We had five classes of 6th grade last year, and this year they were condensed into four classes. Class size is larger. We are less able to split up combinations of students. There are more students with significant behavior challenges in each class. Higher class size, and higher numbers of challenging kids in each class, leads to more students being sent out of the room. Being sent out the classroom leads to damaged relationships, and damaged relationships lead to more challenging behavior.

Classroom Community - I want to develop meaningful relationships with all of my students, and for them to develop them with each other. They will learn best if they feel emotionally safe. They will learn best if I know about their talents, families, fears, and dreams for the future. When I have 180 students each day, my memory is not good enough to remember all the things students tell me in a day. If I had lower classes, not only would I know my students' stories, but the other students would know them, too.

Discourse - Academic discourse means that students are engaging with the teacher and each other in meaningful discussion of a text or topic. It builds communication skills, which is critical in today's world. Large class sizes drown out quieter voices. With 38 students in a class, creating a safe space where students can share and be vulnerable is difficult if not impossible.

Noticing - In health class, teaching about topics such as drug addiction, mental illness, suicide prevention, or the reproductive system, I need to be able to notice if a student looks upset or queasy. Noticing is hard in a class of 38 students. It upsets me to think that a student might be showing signs of depression or grief, or is about to pass out, and I may not notice it.

Noise - Middle schools are noisy places. Middle school students generally have two volumes--silent or LOUD. And no matter how well we train them in our classrooms, a classroom of 38 kids working on group projects is a struggle. Teachers make instructional choices that are less engaging because of a full classroom. I have always wanted to create a video or podcast project. But with so many kids in a small space, it's impossible. In addition, students on the autism spectrum frequently are sensitive to noise, and many students cannot learn in noisy environments, either because they are introverted or because they are easily distracted.

Environmental Health - A teacher at the high school tells me they have 45 kids in a classroom, with no windows, designed for 25. The ventilation system was not designed for 47 people. The room becomes hot and it becomes difficult to breathe, and there is no fresh air or natural light. These rooms are a health hazard for students and teachers. Related to this, 45 students in a classroom like this during cold and flu season will increase the number of sick kids and increase absenteeism.

Anxiety and Panic Attacks - We know that many of our students are suffering from clinical anxiety and panic attacks. Mental illness is on the rise for teens across the country. Anxiety is one of the top reasons we hear from our chronically absent students for their absence, and I regularly talk students through panic attacks. When kids' brains are in fight, flight, or freeze mode, they cannot learn. The noise and lack of personal space in large class sizes exacerbate their anxiety and cause panic attacks. If we had lower class sizes, chronic absenteeism would likely decrease, and student's anxiety might be more manageable.

Community Connection - When I have 180 students, I cannot get to know their families well enough. I can barely remember who I talked to at conferences. If we want our schools to be closely connected to our communities, we must lower class size, lower the overall number of students teachers teach, which will lower workload, which will give secondary teachers more time to connect with families at a deeper level.

Instructional Style - Do you know how hard it is to organize 35 6th graders to do the same thing at the same time? Many middle school students are kinesthetic learners, and they need to move during a class period. They cannot sit in a chair and focus for 50 minutes, of course, they're 12. With crowded classrooms, teachers cannot plan movement into the class period. Teachers are forced to have all students doing the same thing at the same time, because of space, noise, and management of

behaviors. They cannot be out of their seats because there's not enough space. Teachers do not have table or counter space to set up stations or centers with activities that will engage students.

If my class sizes were lower:

- I would remember what the students told me about their lives, interests, and families
- I would do many more creative projects
- I would build classroom community in a way that I can't now
- I would take more field trips and have more guest speakers
- I would dig deeper into every topic
- I would give students more opportunities for self-directed learning based on their own interests.

In summary, If Kraxberger Middle School had lower class sizes,

- Our students would be safer, physically and emotionally
- Our students would be more engaged and learn more
- Our students would be able to explore and develop their own talents
- Our staff would not have to choose between their students and their own health
- Our communities would feel supported and connected with the school

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Celeste Pellicci

Kraxberger Middle School

Gladstone School District