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A matter of size

Columbia Public Schools keeping budget cuts away from classrooms.



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Rock Bridge High School math instructor Lisa Holt explains finding angles to her Algebra II Honors Students.

By [Jonathon Braden](#)

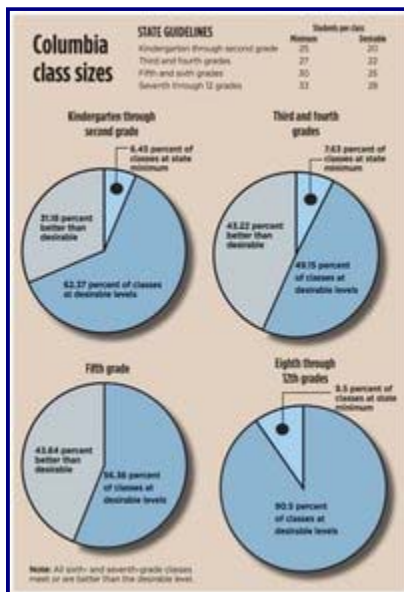
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Thirty-two wooden desks have been crowded into groups of four in Room 122 at Rock Bridge High School.



Photo by [Don Shrubshell](#)

Rock Bridge High School math teacher Lisa Holt checks the work of Algebra II Honors students, from left, Alyssa Fancher, Albert Lee, Rachel Vincenz and Cameron Webber.



Black streaks shine on the light-brown-and-white tiled floor — the result of restless students sliding their chairs back and forth for nine months out of the year. Green, yellow and pink paper signs hang above the chalkboards in the room, such as one that reads: “Does our solution answer the original question?”

At the front of the room, math teacher Lisa Holt, a 25-year veteran of Rock Bridge, directs this Algebra II Honors class as the students gaze from their clumped-together pods. Holt drags an image of the U.S. flag on a pole on the room’s SmartBoard and asks the students to estimate the height of the flagpole if its base is 28 feet and the elevation to its top is 63 degrees.

“We’re bringing back a lot of geometry today,” she later tells the class.

While she speaks, these honors kids mostly stare at her — save the occasional intrapod chatter. When she doodles on the board, students exchange whispers.

At 31 kids, this class is a rarity in Columbia Public Schools: It is crowded. Out of all of the district’s classes in grades eight to 12, only 9.5 percent of them hold more than 28 teenagers at one time — the minimum standard set by the state — although almost 26 percent of the classes at Rock Bridge host at least 29 kids.

“As you can see from that, this year, in many cases, we’re in outstanding shape with good class sizes,” Superintendent Chris Belcher said.

KEEPING CUTS AWAY FROM THE CLASSROOM

The smaller classes reflect the district’s focus.

For the past three years, when the district has slashed its budget to fix past mistakes and to prepare for state cuts, the common mantra from district administrators and teachers has been “keep cuts away from the classroom” to protect student performance. As a result, literacy and math coaches, outreach counselors and other supporting staff positions have been eliminated.

But does the district’s solution, small class sizes, answer the original question — how to improve student achievement?

Some Columbia administrators say “no.” They think too much emphasis has been on the classroom instead of on other facets of student achievement, such as providing instructional coaches and other support services. They say parent worries partly drive the importance of class sizes instead of data.

Researchers also have questioned the benefits of focusing on class sizes as opposed to other areas, such as teacher quality and curriculum choices. Teachers, though, plead for fewer bodies in their classes so they can develop a better relationship with each student.

This year, as the district braces for the impact of cutting dozens of teaching positions, the debate about class sizes continues as a worried community watches and school officials decide how much importance to place on the number of kids in a room.

“No one would disagree that class size has an impact,” said Ines Segert, member of the Columbia Board of Education and the board’s student performance committee. “But when you start to look at how to implement that data in a district or kind of large-scale, then you have to really pay attention to the details.”

Mike Jeffers remembers a different school district when he became principal of Hickman High School five years ago. Literacy and math coaches helped teachers do their jobs better and assisted students outside the classroom, he said, and more guidance counselors helped students with issues that affected them inside the classroom.

“It was definitely a kid-centered district,” Jeffers said.

Three years of cuts later, coaching positions have been eliminated. Fewer people work in student success centers to help at-risk kids earn credits needed to graduate. And fewer counselors are around to intervene when kids struggle.

“It’s become increasingly classroom only,” Jeffers said. “The priority has been: What can we do to keep any cut away from the classroom? The problem with that is in order for kids to be successful in the classroom, you also need to have some support around them, especially with those kids who have a variety of needs.”

At Hickman, class sizes have remained in the range of 22 to 25 students despite cuts, Jeffers said.

Most classes at Rock Bridge, however, have increased, Principal Kathy Ritter said, in some cases swelling from 23 kids to 27 or more.

Parent perceptions partly drive the worry about large classes, Jeffers said. “They don’t want their child to get lost in the classroom.”

Amy Larson, president of the Parent-Teacher Association at Parkade Elementary School, fears more students in a room would disrupt learning. Her son, Hadley, 6, is a first-grade student at Parkade, where the student-to-classroom ratio is 19-to-1.

With a class of 20, Larson said, she suspects two or three students might disrupt a class. Bump the number to 30, and she worries more kids would hamper the education of the students, such as Hadley, who are trying to pay attention. But Larson admits her concerns are based on assumptions.

“It’s probably more what I’m thinking and what I assume than what I’ve seen,” she said.

From her experience at Rock Bridge, Ritter is convinced classrooms should remain smaller.

“I think we would all say that the key to education is what happens in each classroom and supporting teachers, and that means trying to have a manageable number of kids that they can teach is paramount,” she said. “Maybe we can do without some supplies or we can rethink transportation or we can rethink some student support, but we can’t compromise quality classroom teaching.”

TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS IS KEY

Not all parents and administrators feel so strongly.

School board member Christine King grew up in Westerville, Ohio, with classes that had more than 30 kids. She’s not concerned about her own children sitting with 26 and 27 other kids in their classes. “I don’t worry that much about it because I know how important the teacher is,” she said.

Research shows that class sizes make a difference in student achievement, but only when class sizes are very small — smaller than the school district can afford in most cases.

A 1980s study from Tennessee compared classes of 13 to 17 students against classes with 22 to 26 students using longitudinal research on K-3 classrooms that included 79 schools, more than 300 classrooms and more than 7,000 randomly assigned students and teachers.

Researchers found that the students in smaller classes outperformed students in larger classes. The study “leaves no doubt that small classes have an advantage over larger classes in reading and math in the early primary grades,” wrote Jeremy Finn of the State University of New York at Buffalo and Charles Achilles of Eastern Michigan University.

But if class sizes exceed 15 students, other research shows the effect on student achievement is diluted.

Eric Hanushek, an economist at Stanford University, studied classes that ranged from 15 to 40 students. “The evidence we have is pretty extensive: Any negative impacts of raising class sizes are sort of small to nonexistent,” he said.

Instead, Hanushek said, the quality of the teacher has the greatest impact on academic success.

“A bad teacher with a small class is not very good, and a good teacher with a larger class is good,” he said.

Hanushek said he was surprised by the research, “but it’s been found so consistently across other studies, so that to me, there’s no question about this anymore.”

He thinks letting the number of students in a class increase is the “obvious” way to handle budget cuts.

A Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation study coincides with Hanushek’s findings. The foundation spent billions of dollars on reducing class sizes at schools around the country only to conclude that a teacher’s effectiveness has more impact on student learning than any other factor under a school system’s control, including class size.

Belcher countered that the studies don’t measure how cramming kids into a room affects teacher morale, which can affect teacher effectiveness. “All your gains or all your problems are most impacted by the classroom teacher,” he said.

In the back of Room 122, near the door, sophomore Annie Phillips draws her own version of the U.S. flag on a piece of paper. To Annie, the number of her peers in this class is regular.

She’s enrolled in a world studies course with about 60 students but has two instructors who teach at different times. The class teaches social studies and English in the same course, requiring the two different teachers.

“It’s a lot harder to learn in there,” she said.

The class also is smaller than Holt is used to. A year ago, before the school added another section of Algebra II Honors, the class held 35 students.

After explaining a problem, Holt saunters around the room, checking in with each group of teenagers. She’s unable to meet with them individually every class period, so these honors students must depend less on Holt and rely more on each other, she said.

It is not necessarily the student-teacher relationship Holt would prefer, but it’s the class size she has been given.


“There’s a whole lot to teaching that is the relationship with the kid,” Holt said.

Add another 10 students to her class, she hypothesized, and “I’m not ever going to get to know you.”

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