

Washington Post, “The Answer Sheet” blog by Valerie Strauss
Posted at 05:00 AM ET, 07/12/2011

How important is class size after all?

This was written by [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.

At a dinner honoring Mark Hopkins, president of Williams College from 1836 to 1872, President James A. Garfield said, “The ideal college is Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other.”

One teacher: One student.

Three or four years ago, one of my granddaughters was enrolled in a biology course at a state university. Her class met in an auditorium.

One teacher: One thousand, four hundred and fifty students.

[Class size](#) is one of a long list of education-related issues about which arguments rage. Generally speaking, educators want small classes because they allow more individual attention. Those averse to taxes want large classes because they’re cheaper. Many think class size makes no important difference. [Bill Gates](#) speaks approvingly of one master teacher, alone in a television studio, lecturing millions of kids.

What you think is the best teacher-learner ratio depends primarily on your values and your theory of learning. I’m not qualified to delve into what prompts people to value the life of the mind and money differently, but I do know a little about theories of learning.

The theory that drives nearly all of American education — indeed, the theory that shapes most schooling around the world — is simple: Those who know tell those who don’t know. The tellers then try to remember what the tellers have told them.

This is the theory that underlies lectures, textbooks, chalkboards, whiteboards, Cliff Notes, quizzes, tests, grades, classrooms, classroom furniture arrangement, school building design, most “distance learning,” and thousands of bureaucratic policies and procedures.

At the other end of the theoretical spectrum from the “tell ‘em and test ‘em” theory lies “[unschooling](#).” It dumps the whole idea of class size and everything that goes with it. [Anne Sullivan](#), best known as [Helen Keller’s](#) teacher, was an advocate of [unschooling](#).

She wrote, “...if a child is left to himself, he will think more and better, if less showily. Let him go and come freely, let him touch real things and combine his impressions for himself, instead of

sitting indoors at a little round table, while a sweet-voiced teacher suggests that he build a stone wall with his wooden blocks..."

I come down somewhere between those two theories, but considerably closer to the Anne Sullivan end. I land there because too much talking and too little doing kills learning. Teaching, real teaching, makes a difference in what happens in kids' heads. That requires both knowing what's going on in those heads to find a foundation upon which to build, and then designing an actual mind-changing experience.

Rarely is bending kids' ears a mind-changing experience.

Engineering learning experiences is challenging, complicated by the fact that no two minds in a class are exactly alike. But class size is only one of many complex variables involved in educating. It gets talked about because it's easy to quantify and understand, but a whole range of other matters are of equal or greater importance.

For example, there's the matter of the best place to educate. In a design competition, the typical school classroom would surely win the "sterile" prize. Hundreds of thousands of them across America differ only in minor detail. They're isolated from the real world. They run on schedules appropriate for medium security prisons. Kids associate them with passivity and authority. It's a rare classroom that has more to offer an inquiring mind than does a vacant lot, a job site, a mall, a street corner, the city dump, or even a school's mechanical equipment room, janitor closet, and cafeteria.

There's the matter of staffing. For just about forever, the rule has been one teacher and one class. My vote for instructional leadership goes to three- or four-person teams assigned blocks of students for at least two or three years. For many of the young in today's world, that's as close to stability and a sense of family and community as they're likely to get.

There's the matter of time. Sitting in a classroom for hours a day, years on end, is sufficiently at odds with human nature to be classed as cruel and unusual punishment. Most of what we know comes from the discovery of relationships between aspects of reality we once didn't think were related. That discovery process happens most frequently in the real world, not in schools that treat subjects as if they had little or nothing to do with each other, learner eyes and ears tuned to pale shadows of reality called "textbooks" and "teacher talk."

There's the matter of what's taught — the curriculum. The traditional math, science, social studies, and language arts regimen is a bloated, random, unorganized, disconnected, intellectually unmanageable mess. It needs a radical slimming down, a clear, concrete purpose, a far simpler system for organizing knowledge, and a focus on the present, the future, and the past as prologue.

There's the matter of measuring performance. Multiple choice, machine-scored tests are an expensive joke being successfully sold to the naïve, the trusting, and the statistically challenged as a science. The tests relate to educating as memorizing a flight manual relates to flying, as

marching in a parade relates to an army's fighting ability, as exchanging marriage vows relates to a successful marriage.

There are hundreds of ways to mix and vary class size, learning environments, staffing, schedules, curricula, and other factors affecting the quality of education, but forget all those potential options. Only if parents, grandparents, and caring citizens revolt will the mayors, CEOs, lawyers, venture capitalists, rich philanthropists, and politicians now pulling the education "deform" strings and levers let go of the "just work harder" mantra.

Questions: What best explains the last quarter century of attacks on public schooling — the convening of education reform conferences with no educators invited, the constant denigrating of teachers, the destruction of due process protections, the rejection of [poverty](#) as a major factor in school performance? What best explains the refusal to respect research, legislation cleverly designed to hang the "Failing" label on more schools every year, orchestrated campaigns pushing vouchers, tuition tax credits, alternative licensing for teachers, counterproductive merit pay schemes, and weakened local control?

These aren't efforts to improve public schools; they're sneaky approaches to privatizing them. But so artful has been the campaign, millions of people opposed to privatization have acted, and continue to act, in ways that promote it.

Should class sizes be reasonably small? Of course. But that's only one small cog in the gears driving American education. The powerful interests intent on destroying public schooling don't mind talking about that particular cog, for it diverts attention from what they're doing—systematically dismantling the rest of the machine and selling the parts to corporate interests.

-0-