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Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

### **Size Matters**—Peter Smagorinsky

One of the debates surrounding public education centers on the question of whether or not size matters—in this case, class size. In her May 12, 2011, “Get Schooled” blog, Maureen Downey reviews findings from a recent report from the Brookings Brown Center on Education Policy that concludes that, compared to other investments in schools, reducing class size has a relatively low payoff. Educational underwriter Bill Gates further claims that increases in class size have no detrimental effect on student learning—as measured by test scores—and so it makes sense to eliminate ceilings on class size so that fewer teachers will be needed. This plan will enable the redirection of salary funds, perhaps toward merit pay, because, as he says, “the dominant factor is having a great teacher in front of the classroom.”

This thinking relies on a set of fallacies that show a stunning ignorance of why people teach and how people learn. These fallacies are perpetuated by people who have never taught, but because they happen to have tons of money behind their opinions, have accumulated an inordinate amount of power over how schools are run. Based on my experiences as both a teacher and teacher educator, I see the following problems undermining the simplistic beliefs that are behind the effort to raise class size and teaching loads from their current levels of 150 or so kids a day (in high schools, which is the setting for my experiences) to upwards of 200.

One fallacy concerns the idea that the only time that teachers are in contact with students is during class. The sort of “great teacher” that Bill Gates and the Brookings Brown Center on Education Policy envision only exists standing in front of 40 or more students preparing them to take standardized tests, which can be machine graded. Actual great teachers, however, spend a lot of time outside class working with students, and the more students, the more work. Now, I actually love working, so the problem is not requiring work of teachers. The problem is misunderstanding the nature of that work, and the consequences of piling unlimited numbers of students into classrooms as a way to save money under the illusion that standardized test scores represent learning.

I was a high school English teacher, and my students at UGA aspire to teach English. In English classes, one-third of the curriculum is (or should be) devoted to writing instruction; literature and language comprise the other two strands. Writing instruction takes time—it involves more than just assigning papers. And it's not the sort of thing that an electronic scanning device can grade. Let's say I have 150 students (a low load for many teachers): 5 classes of 30 students. Let's say that every day, I spend one minute outside class on each student. That's 2.5 hours a day outside the confines of the school day that I spend on my teaching.

But one minute per day per student doesn't come close to what's required to teach students to write well. Let's say that a teacher spends a relatively paltry 10 minutes per week per student grading writing. That's 25 hours a week outside class only on grading writing and not the full range of obligations that face teachers: filing attendance reports, doing Individualized Educational Program paperwork, writing lesson plans, meeting with students outside class to help with homework, calling parents, being called by parents, doing hall and cafeteria duty, and much else.

Now let's go the Bill Gates route and say that 40 kids per class is reasonable, because upping class size to 40 kids doesn't appreciably increase standardized test scores. This gives me 200 students a day, and 33 hours a week outside class just from devoting 10 minutes to each student's writing, without doing anything else outside the confines of my class. Maybe Bill Gates is made of sterner stuff than I am, but I'd have a hard time being a "great teacher" under those conditions.

I don't know of a single person who decided to go into teaching in order to raise test scores. Most of them want to make a difference in kids' lives, a goal that requires, above all, good working conditions. If you want great teachers, then provide great working conditions so that half of the profession doesn't quit within the first 5 years, which is what is presently happening.

One working condition that matters is having class loads that enable the sorts of rich teaching and learning that make the day feel worthwhile for students and teachers and that make working outside class manageable. The superficial teaching and learning that follow from overcrowded classrooms will never attract or help retain the great teachers that these great policymakers envision. If education is to matter in substantive ways, then great conditions, including a reasonable class size, need to be in place to make school a place where great teachers and students want to be.