

Too Many Kids  
Not Enough  
Space

words| Caroline Christianson Layout| Marandah Mangra-Dutcher  
Research Assistant| Ciaran Rigby

## With class sizes growing each year, teachers and students are at their breaking point

On a Friday afternoon, Spanish teacher Peggy Fox found herself staring down a stack of 210 quizzes. She knew the weekend ahead was not going to be relaxing. "You want to get those [quizzes] back in a timely manner, and yet you want to do a good job," Fox said. "This leads to not giving the personal feedback that we would love to give. Instead we end up doing numerical values on their quizzes, because we have to have a life outside of school."

With the sophomore class at 583 students, juniors at 600, and seniors at 545 students, class sizes are ballooning to the high twenties and thirties. Teachers and students are struggling to adjust the cramped facilities, as well as managing the stress that comes with an increased class sizes.

AP Psychology teacher, Jesse Dowell, is teaching seven out of eight periods, with 208 students in total. This is a stressful change for Dowell, as in previous years he has taught six out of eight periods, with about 180-185 students. Due to his larger class sizes and extra workload, he has less time to plan, grade, and answer questions. "This year I am noticing how it is taking longer to learn names," Dowell said. "There is kind of a tipping point. Once you get past a certain class size, it may as well be a 300-person lecture hall. Nobody wants to raise their hands and ask questions."

A lot of weight has been put on teachers' shoulders to manage more students in the past five years. AP language teacher, Aaron Eldridge, has noticed his class sizes have steadily risen from year to year. "As I've taught, my AP classes were capped at 25,

then it was 26, then it was 28, and now it is 32," Eldridge said. "You can see it creeping up."

Eldridge is often overwhelmed with the amount of grading and planning he has to do outside of school, but tries to balance his work and home life. "I try because of my

---

We are people to.  
It's just the same  
as students...I  
would love  
to double our  
staffing and half  
our class sizes."  
- Peggy Fox

---

daughter," Eldridge said. "I try to be present when she is awake and when she is home because I only get to see her three hours a day, except for the weekends. So when I do have a lot of grading, it can be a lot. It can be eight or 10 hours a week."

Dowell has also found his grading responsibilities increase. "I have 210 students and I give them a writing assignment...if I

spend five minutes looking at each one, that's 1000 plus minutes. That's like 17 hours of grading. And pretty much all of that is done outside of contract hours, because you don't get time during the day to grade. That's a crushing amount of work to try to do. I think it has big impacts on [education]."

In Iowa, the recommended class size is 17-20 students per teacher, Johnston is greatly exceeding that recommendation, with some classes capped at 32 students. Johnston has been growing substantially in recent years, and a limited budget is a big factor in large class sizes. According to the Des Moines Register, "State supplemental aid, the amount of new money available to schools, grew an average of 3.27 percent annually between 2000 and 2010. Since then it has dropped to 1.73 percent per year. That's less than inflation, which rose 1.81 percent annually on average from 2011 to 2018, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics. That has led to budget cuts for many districts."

Limited money in the district has led to fewer instructors, and more kids. "If I don't have enough teachers, class sizes just have to go up," Principal Ryan Woods said. "It's really budget driven. It's a tough decision. It affects education. Some people would say to truly affect learning, you've got to get down to less than 16 kids...the question becomes, is 25 kids better or worse than 30? With relationships that is tougher, but on the performance side a lot of research shows you have to get to like, those 16 or less kids if it affects learning."

Superintendent Laura Kacer often finds it frustrating dealing with the restrictions



put on the budget by the government. "Advocate with your legislatures and encourage them to fund education at a higher rate than they currently are," Kacer said. "What people don't understand is if you don't invest in education early on, then your other expenses become astronomical. For example, incarceration or policing neighborhoods. The less educated your population is, the more problems you are going to have."

In the past couple of years, teachers have had to change assignments and coursework to account for their increased class sizes, which results in less practice and feedback for students. "I have talked to many teachers who are like, instead of five writing assignments I am doing two," Dowell said. "So students get less practice and more and more things become multiple choice. It just becomes less rigorous overtime because the teachers can't keep up with the workload."

Students have adapted to the bigger class sizes, with some taking a more self-reliant approach. "I feel like with bigger classes, since the teacher has to focus on so many students, it feels a little more impersonal, but I feel like my education is not being impacted too bad, it's just independent," Teija Mitchell '20 said. "Feedback will come back later just because they have so many students. I think I'm used to it at this point."

Classes like language arts, foreign language, and social studies find it harder to give adequate feedback with big class sizes which makes it more difficult for students. "Giving specific and focused feedback for writing for that many students is a challenge," Eldridge said. "I constantly think about how to be more efficient and have it be less about me and more about the students assessing themselves, doing their own work and all that. That is such a big transformation

1:29

average teacher/student ratio

that is hard for me to kind of wrap my mind around."

Teachers often struggle to give feedback and grades back in a timely manner because they feel unsupported. "We have been told by various administration that class size does not matter in student success," Fox said. "I personally feel you can find research to support a variety of opinions and I feel like those same people that are telling their teachers that class size doesn't matter, when they were in the classroom they would not have supported that idea. I think that type of research supports budgets, and not student well-being. So I would love to see us put student well-being and student education as opposed to saving money."

Creative projects, like photography, and critical individualized work time is also lost when teachers have to manage 30 or more students at a time. Fox has been teaching seven periods for the past five years, and has found that it is harder to do projects and individualized work with her large number of Spanish students. "We start to get really limited on the types of activities we can do with kids, especially when it comes to speaking," Fox said. "Speaking can take quite a bit of time. Even if we do a group skit, we need people to speak for a certain amount of time for us to really get a gauge on their proficiency. It can be very overwhelming."

Bailey Oliver '22 is in digital photography, and has noticed it is harder to manage in a bigger class. "We can't take as many pictures... and we never have enough cameras," Oliver said. "Every person doesn't get their own camera then when we come back sometimes people delete your pictures and then you have to start over. A lot of times there is not really a grade, so we don't get good feedback." Shey students who are afraid to speak out

are especially overlooked in a big classroom. "Smaller class sizes allow students to connect with other students better," Fox said. "It becomes more of a community type feel. It allows your students to connect with their teachers better because they'll be receiving more individualized attention."

Ideally, teachers would like to have smaller classes, however that may not be a possibility. "I do feel like, as there often is in education, that there is this double standard of what our hopes and desires of what we want to do as educators and the limitations of the realities of space and budget and staffing," Eldridge said.

Due to the rigorous demands of their job, teachers often do not last. "I'm a pretty introverted person actually," Dowell said. "At the end of the day I'm just fried. With the additional seventh section, sometimes I'm like, woah, that's a lot of noise, a lot of stuff going on. There are times when I'm like, do I want to do this for the next 20 years? Is this something I can keep up until I retire? And I don't know. The numbers have really gone up in past years. It makes me think, some days, this might not be long term. The average person just can't handle this for 20-30 years."

### Cramped parking and bleachers

According to the Johnston Community School District, the incoming freshman class for fall of 2021 is currently at 595 students. With the smaller senior class graduating, the freshmen replacing them will boost the enrollment up by 50 students. As a result, the high school will be close to capacity at 1,778 students.

Class sizes are just going to get bigger.

33%

average class size growth since 2010

Tensions are already high among the student body, especially in the student section at football games. Haley Christensen '20 attempts to get to football games at least a half an hour early, but still cannot find a spot in the student section. "We are actually standing on the stairs, and it's a fire hazard," Christensen said. "They forced us to move, but we can't. We have had problems with people shoving each other and arguments happening because it is so crammed in there. People get hit and kicked...that's where all the drama started. If we had more room it would not be like that."

The entire bottom section of the bleachers is designated as the student section, but parents and spectators often sit in the far right section. "If you guys don't fill [the bleachers] up, adults are going to sit there," Woods said. "I think because some adults sit there, kids think, 'oh, you can't do that.' Usually when I get there I say, 'Hey, just FYI, this is designated for our kids'. Some people move, and some people sit and wait. If we use both sections, there will be more than enough room. I get it's fun to be in the packed one, but there is more than enough space if we spread out."

The congested parking lot is also a sore spot among the student body. "The parking lot makes me so mad," Mitchell said. "I think it was a week or two ago it took me 30 minutes to get out of the parking lot. It was so annoying. You either have to get out of the parking lot right away, or you have to wait a little bit just because there are so many cars

and there's only two exits. It's just this giant traffic jam."

Students often have to plan their schedule around the parking lot, because it takes a while to get out of traffic. "I have to leave a lot earlier," Oliver said. "Typically last year I would get to school a lot later, and I would still be able to park. It wasn't a big deal. I am normally late to work because of [the parking lot] so I ended up getting my hours cut, because I have been late so much. The parking lot takes so much time, and it is affecting after school activities, like cheer. I have to be to practice, and most of the time I get out of the parking lot at 3:20, and I have practice at 4:00."

"In my opinion, I just do not like the [parking lot] very much because it stresses me out," Christensen said. "Some of us even park in those neighborhoods and we have to walk a long distance. I always feel bad for the neighbors, but at the same time, where else can we go?"

However inconvenient and stressful big class sizes, crowded student sections, and a cramped parking lot may be, throwing blame on people is not a good solution. "I don't think it is one person's fault," Dowell said. "So I can't say, 'oh, it's the principal's fault,' because at the end of the day it comes down to funding. For the last 10 years schools have not been funded the way they need to be, and those class sizes just gradually pile up. It's a numbers game."

---

"I can feel the tidal wave of work like just about to crush me. Every year I get more and more stressed. October and February are two of the hardest months every year for me to just stay positive and have a good attitude. I think it's the same for kids. Like all of that rolls down hill."

---

- Aaron Eldridge



1:32

class cap size