

Parents Speak

Class Size Counts solicits periodic updates from its advocates to gather class size feedback, along with specific examples of ongoing class size concerns.

Here are some selected parent and teacher testimonials from recent large classes in Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS).

Fairfax County Public Schools: “I want to applaud the efforts of Class Size Counts. Class size and pervasive discipline problems (or rather a lack of appropriate classroom management techniques) are two factors that contributed to our exodus from the school district. Fairfax County School Administrators take zero responsibility for the no-win conditions they saddle their teachers with. A school district of Fairfax County’s stature should be embarrassed by this problem– the current substandard educational setting in the schools (hardly the “world-class education” the school district touts!) Having had contact with public school districts across the country I can ensure you that Class Size really does Count!!!”

1st Grader in a Class with over 30 kids: “My son was in a 1st grade class of more than 30 children. That was one of the toughest years of our time at Haycock. Because the class room was so crowded, my son never retained any of the math concepts. My son is very bright. Today, he gets passed advanced on all his SOLs because I worked with him at home. I visited the classroom one day and his seat was at the very back of the class. They just didn’t have enough room for some of the kids to sit closer to the teacher. I was also a substitute teacher in the public school and I have firsthand knowledge teachers cannot give individualized attention to a class that large. I tried and tried but I just couldn’t get to all of the kids that needed my help. Class size is the number one issue for me as a parent. Each child deserves a well- rounded education and we fail our children when we put them in oversized classrooms.”

4th Grader in a class with over 25 kids: “Students like my son who are included in the regular classroom but have special needs (and this includes all autism spectrum students) n extremely difficult time processing in a classroom that is too large. In my son’s case, Haycock has tried to compensate by creating smaller study groups where they can try to enable these students to keep up, but the resources for teaching smaller groups is so limited. Keeping the classroom size at a minimum is critical at Haycock because it is a leading school in advanced and special needs classes – although the special needs program is not as publicized.”

2nd grader in class with 30 kids: “I literally have a second grader falling through the cracks of the educational system. My son has yet to acquire work habits that serve as the foundation for the rest of his educational career. A few months ago his teacher e-mailed to tell me she had discovered my son had been stuffing his math schoolwork in his desk. She asked to send it home so he could complete it. To my utter dismay, it was more than 20 blank sheets, front and back. I asked the teacher how it is she didn’t know he hadn’t been doing his work for three weeks and her response was she has too many kids in the classroom. I want to note that we think his teacher is outstanding. Please don’t let class size handicap our great teachers and short-change our children’s education! “

5th grader in class of 36:”My 5th grader had 36 students in his class this year 2015-2015 until I got the school board involved and Dr. Garza. One student was moved out of the class to be within state legal limit of 35. I do feel as though my concerns were listened to once I reached superintendent level. The school was visited by an executive principle and the class observed. No changes are being made this school year. It is RIDICULOUS!!!”

Parent Volunteer – Observation of 1st grade class with 20 kids vs. 2nd grade class with 30 kids ~ a stark difference: “In 1st grade with 20 kids in the class, I volunteered during the reading hour several times a month. The children rotated between several stations in the course of an hour. During that hour, the teacher met with each student in a small group setting to work on reading comprehension. Each child was afforded one-on-one attention every single day during this hour. I know this was the case for other subjects as well. Class assignment and tests came back with useful feedback and it was clear when the teacher intervened in explaining instructions or helped my son finish an assignment during class. My son is easily distracted and learns visually. Having instructions read to him, for example, is not useful at all. Having only 20 kids in the class allowed his teacher to relay instructions and important concepts to him on a daily basis in a way that resonated with him. I watched this teacher change her style for other kids as well. Having only 20 kids enabled this teacher to teach each and every student every day.

In contrast, in my son’s 2nd grade class, there are 30 students. I sometimes volunteer during their reading/writing hour. I watch my son’s second grade teacher – who is amazing and inspiring – work as hard as she can to get to as many kids as possible. I am amazed at her ability to keep control of the class and teach as much as she does. During my volunteer hour, she rotates to as many kids as possible to help them develop the more complex reading and writing skills they need to have before going to grade 3. There are always kids who are just not getting the instruction they need – they just sit there unable to complete a task. What inevitably happens is that these kids get their in-class assignments sent home to finish over the weekend because there just wasn’t time for each kid to have enough one-on-one development time with the teacher. Indeed, several parents in this class and others of similar size talk about tests being turned in unfinished, and in-school work not being completed, or being completed without a lot of direction. I do not blame the teacher here – these teachers run marathons each day. They simply have too many kids to be able to connect with individually or for very long on a daily basis.”

2nd Grade class of 33: “My 2nd grader had 30-33 students in each of the FCPS 2nd grade classrooms. That is not acceptable. Given the ESL students and special need students in the class that is just way too much for any one teacher to handle! The students that are eager to learn become bored. There are more discipline issues that arise and no real way to handle it as the Administration remains hands off! FCPS is a top ranked public school system, but we still have serious issues with class sizes and discipline.”

Churchill Road ES: “Parents reported ‘nice sizes because none are at 30’, which ‘never happens’ and they hope it continues. The lopsided AAP - non AAP class pattern exists in 5th (27, 28, 28 for AAP and 19, 21, 22 for non-AAP).”

Colvin Run ES: “Parents say, ‘CRES only has 3 classes at 30 this year’ - two in 4th and one in 6th. The center side has larger classes than the general education side but that seems to be the norm. For example, it’s not fair that AAP 3rd graders sit in class size of 28 each and the GenEd has 20, 20 and 21. It’s great if Colvin Run is your base school and you aren’t in AAP!”

Flint Hill ES: “Class size information is not readily available and difficult to obtain. That, in turn, makes it difficult to understand whether or not we are adequately staffed. For 2015-16 we had over 30 students in each of our 3 Kindergarten classes at the start of the school year; another class was formed in October which was not ideal but the parents are happy that the class sizes are more manageable. This 4th class is in an open area (not a classroom) that used to be the technology room. It does not have doors and is between the K and 1st grade classrooms. Second through 5th grade all have class sizes in the mid to high 20’s and, as we know, students are often added throughout the year. The 6th grade has class sizes over 30 (two at 33 students) and when they change classes for Math they are at 37. There are not even enough desks in the room for all the students. One IA has been hired but it is

unclear how, when, and where that IA is utilized. Parents would like to have more transparency when it comes to class size, in addition to other things, at our school.”

Floris ES: “Fourth and sixth grade classes continue their wavelike progression through the school. Fourth grade classes contain 30, 30, 29 and 31 children, and share one aide between the four classes. Sixth grade classes contain 30, 30, 29 and 28. There is little discrepancy between AAP and GenEd at Floris because those two grades are bursting at the seams already.”

Glasgow MS: “With one exception (Math 7 Honors, which is surprising and perhaps an anomaly this year), advanced academics class sizes are already larger than GenEd - whether one considers Honors (Level III), the Level IV Center classes, or both. Math follows a different pattern and includes students who are not Center-qualified, but test into the classes specifically for math.”

Haycock ES: “Capacity concerns and regulation 1302—stipulations were waived this year for some schools. Is that going to be implemented next year? Should those regulations be loosened for those schools, like Haycock, that have capacity concerns already and won’t get additional class size relief due to the regulation, as written?”

Kilmer MS: “Some classes are so large that it is also affecting how teachers interact with their students. Because teachers are buried in paperwork with 130-150 students, they do not have time to communicate directly with their students. When an assignment is missing or a quiz grade looks troublesome, it’s noted only on the bi-weekly progress report (sent electronically to parents). Especially in those teen years when personal relationships are so vital, failing to have time for that face-to-face communication is detrimental for our students’ personal and academic growth.”

Louise Archer ES: “AAP classes are the biggest, as usual. In 3rd grade, GenEd classes are 19, 19 and 20; two AAPs are 26 & 27. For 4th grade, GenEd is at 27 & 28; AAP is 32 & 32. The 5th grade GenEd is at 25, 26 & 26; AAP is 30 & 29. And 6th is the worst: GenEd is at 18 & 18; AAP is 31, 32 & 33. We are so used to this happening, it is sad we are used to it.”

Lake Anne ES. “Small numerous classes across the board. Lots of 16, 17 and 18s. The immersion and switch from AM to PM doesn't really effect the class groupings. They average around 22 for most, only two 'large' classes at 26 - one in 2nd and one in 6th.”

Langley HS: “Most parents we asked said their students were in classes with student totals in the upper 20's to low 30's, with some larger and some smaller. Honors and AP classes are frequently the largest. The large class sizes negatively impact the learning environment due to the extensive reconstruction going on. Langley has 36 temporary classrooms, which are cramped even with moderate class sizes, but with 30+ students they literally have to squeeze by each other to get to their desks. There are, however, some anomalies; for example, one freshman English course has under 20 students, whereas the other freshman English classes have upper 20's to 30+ students. Some students have told their parents that they cannot get time with teachers during "Saxon time" blocks due to the number of students each teacher has to see.”

Marshall Road ES: “Our school is in a similar situation as Vienna ES with all the new family homes construction around the school as well as near the metro that are within the MRES boundary. Our Kindergarten, 2nd and 4th grades have high class sizes.”

Mosby Woods: "Feels packed all over. Parents said the AAP classes in 4th, 5th and 6th are all at 28 and 29, while non-center classes are 24-25. A 3rd grade parent said the GenEd classes were huge at 30, 30 and 29 while the AAP bused-in kids were smaller classes of 24, 25 and 25 and 'that never happens.' This was the only oddity noted at the Open House this year.”

Oakton ES: “Average class sizes in grades 4-6 are 2 heads higher than the FCPS size. However,

many classes are well over the average, both GenEd and AAP. The largest hit coming in the AAP classes which average 32 students in grades 3-6. Some impacts of those large classes, displayed in 2016 graduating class are lower SOL scores than typical AAP graduates, undetected learning disabilities (perhaps due to the lack of individualized attention available), and overwhelmed teachers.”

Stuart HS: “Last year, Stuart HS was tasked with increasing test scores and pass rates to improve performance. Our IB Diploma teachers were tapped to provide remedial support for students at risk of failing SOLs. That left our IB students basically to succeed on their own; while our teachers are dedicated, there are only so many hours in the day.”

Spring Hill ES: “Open house revealed a tight 6th grade at 27, 27, 27, 28 and 28 and uncomfortable 3rd grade at 26, 27, 28, 28 and 29.”

Vienna ES. “They are pleased with their tiny upper grades 4th-6th since many leave for the AAP centers, but that leaves 1st & 2nd as bigger classes compared to the overall school. The construction in Vienna has many big houses replacing small retiree homes, and thus houses have small children. First grade has 26, 28 and 26 and second has 24, 24 and 26. Also, at least one first grade section exceeds 27 students and it's only the beginning of the 2nd grading period. Should we ask for an IA now?”

Wolftrap ES: “We are having problems getting information about staffing at Wolftrap ES so that we can understand whether it is adequately resourced. It is unclear to parents how and when resource teachers and IAs are used. I'd like clarification from Gatehouse about whether it is reasonable for parents to have information about where and when the school's IAs and resource teachers are utilized during the school day. We hear from parents who are concerned by how little they know about which adults are working with their children during the day. What degree of transparency would be reasonable to expect from administrators with regard to allocation of staff resources at the school level?”

“Our 4th grade AAP class is at their limit of 30 kids, whereas GenEd classes are much smaller. During most crucial AAP Math and AAP LA learning times these kids are sitting in crowded classes. This is neither fair to our kids nor our teacher, who has a Chinese teacher or lunch lady serving as the IA, which doesn't add any value to their learning environment.” “The 6th grade AAP class has 32 students; two non-AP students were moved into the AAP Math class at the beginning of the school year making 34 students in total for AAP Math. Several things occurred with this 6th grade class: the AAP class was too large to begin with when created 4 years ago, no ability for non-AAP students to get access to the AAP curriculum (as a pull-up except for the 2 students added in this year), no ability based groupings within the GenEd class (over the last 3 years), no standardized, published and transparent basis was used to allow some students to move into the AAP math class and no other students in this 6th grade year. Many students in the AP Math are being tutored outside of school to keep up with the curriculum.”

Westbriar ES: “Our 2nd grade classes are at 29 students, with 6 spelling/vocabulary groups because we have such a wide range of student abilities, from newly-arrived ESOL students to high-achieving, voracious readers. That meant that each student interacts with their teacher 1/6 of the time during this important language arts lesson, which is difficult for 8-year-olds.”

Madison HS: “A biology teacher told me that she ‘does not have time to speak to her students outside of lectures – there are just too many of them’. On many occasions, my child has complained that he waits up to 20 minutes in line for help during Warhawk time to get help with an assignment or to go over a quiz, and by the time he gets to meet with the teacher, they tell him that they don't have enough time and that he should go to Blackboard. In other words, ‘go teach yourself’.”

Manassas Park HS: “Teacher workload from overly large classes. A Manassas Park HS chemistry teacher left her high paying consulting job to follow her lifelong goal of becoming a teacher, yet quit teaching altogether after just a few years because “FCPS has some of the highest class sizes. I'd have

150 chemistry students, and/or biology students too. With all those labs to set up, papers to grade, and students to get to know, it is just too tiring. I was already getting up at 4:30 am. I can't do it anymore."

AAP Classes: "According to the Fairfax County Association of the Gifted (FCAG) report: http://www.fcag.org/documents/AAP_Class_Size_Analysis.pdf, even though AAP kids make up only about 20-25% of the total FCPS population, they make up over 50% of all the classes in the county with 27+ kids and almost 60% of the classes with 30+ kids. Also, almost 50% of all AAP students are in classes with 27+ kids, and another 11% of all AAP students are in classes with 30+ kids."