

Cancer and Class Size – by Dr. Sue Skidmore

“Your daughter has Stage 3 cancer.” What? My kid is twenty-four-years old; she can’t have cancer.

“Please don’t worry, Sue. This type of cancer has a cure rate of 99.9%. Here’s a copy of the research done over the last 60 years, and you will note, if this protocol of chemotherapy is followed, it ensures this success rate.”

Being an educator, I tried to make sense of these events in my world. Indeed, every politician, textbook company, parent, and community constituent pontificate about America’s public schools. Each of them offers advice from their frame of reference what should be done to **fix** the public schools. What should be done to ratchet up student achievement. What should be done to maintain the United States as #1.

True, my daughter’s physician was solely concerned with her. As we sat in his private office, no other patients were clamoring for his attention. He didn’t have to pause to allow another patient to go to the restroom nor to clean up vomit from a stomach flu victim. He was focused on her. Humbly, he offered clinical studies which illustrated and affirmed his proposed treatment plan. In short, he had longitudinal data to support his decision, and was not distracted by thirty others. In short, there were no interruptions—unlike the minute-to-minute events which unfold in every American classroom.

In my futile attempt to draw comparisons between the oncologist and the public school system, I could not. Why? **There is no longitudinal, reliable, nor valid data in education.** Simply put: over time, we don’t know what works best because we are in valiant search of a magical solution to ensure the success of every child. We buy into “reforms,” we droll over the promises of textbook companies, and we are forced into new dictates by government.

As an educator, the most frequent question, complaint, and often outrage with which I’m confronted is class size. Again, I emphasize there is no reliable, nor valid data that validates optimum class size. Of course, there are copious amounts of studies that are contradictory: the number of students in the room **doesn’t** matter; the number of students **does** matter. Unlike, the oncologist, I can’t assure parents with 99.9% accuracy what class size equals success. Yet, in my own observation of the educational world, I believe:

- In the era of choice, parents choose schools based on the number of kids in a room. They are not concerned about teacher credentials, the number of books in the library, or the overall school facility; they just want to know how many kids are going to be in the class.
- Secondly, in a homogenized school, a class with an outstanding teacher will likely be able to deliver instruction to multitudes. No sweat. (This model is particularly successful in a country like Japan.) Yet, in America, our children would lack exposure to reality, unless they went to a private East Coast prep school; they would be sheltered from such realities as ethnicity, socio-economic deprivation, disabilities, etc. When they reached adulthood, they might encounter difficulty trying to work with all folk, not a select few.

- Thirdly, there's no one-size-fits-all, magic number for class size. I've been in classrooms in New York City where 40+ first graders were the average. Given my cursory observation, it was chaotic. As a former high school and a college English teacher, I know, without a doubt, I am incapable of teaching 150 students to research and to write term papers. When I taught part-time at the college level, I had a maximum of 50 students, but I spent over sixty hours a week on my patio reading, advising, and editing their rough drafts or papers in order to return their work at the next class meeting. Unlike math teachers, I was unable to assess if the student had arrived at **the correct answer**. I had to read some dreadful stuff and to suggest ways to improve.

In summary, my daughter's cancer is in remission. The issue of class size, in the foreseeable future, will remain a mystery. However, I absolutely know with 99.9% accuracy, smaller class sizes cost money. Full-day kindergarten, art, music, physical education, electricity, and air conditioning cost money. Cancer treatments cost money. I shall ponder this notion through the first Tuesday in November.