

What Difference Does Crowding Make?

Children, teachers, program and community are affected when classrooms and schools are overcrowded.

Pledge to Children

To YOU, our children, who hold within you our most cherished hopes, we the members of the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth, relying on your full response, make this pledge:

From your earliest infancy we give you our love, so that you may grow with trust in yourself and in others.

We will recognize your worth as a person and we will help you to strengthen your sense of belonging.

We will respect your right to be yourself and at the same time help you to understand the rights of others, so that you may experience cooperative living.

We will help you to develop initiative and imagination, so that you may have the opportunity freely to create.

We will encourage your curiosity

and your pride in workmanship, so that you may have the satisfaction that comes from achievement.

We will provide the conditions for wholesome play that will add to your learning, to your social experience, and to your happiness.

. . . .

We will provide you with rewarding educational opportunities, so that you develop your talents and contribute to a better world.

We will protect you against exploitation and undue hazards and help you grow in health and strength.

. . . .

THE CITIZENS of the United States expressed their intentions toward children through the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth. Does crowding in the classrooms across the nation have any effect upon the carrying out of those intentions? Does crowding tear down the very values we are trying to attain for children when we say we will *recognize your worth as a person, respect your right to be yourself and at the same*

time help you understand the rights of others, help you develop initiative and imagination, encourage your curiosity and your pride in workmanship, provide you with rewarding educational opportunities, and protect you against exploitation?

What Crowding Does . . .

Does crowding really make a difference? Here is what people who are living in the midst of it say crowding does to

children, to teachers, to the program offered and procedures used, to the parents and to the community.

. . . To the Children

We know that the school setting and schedule should promote the physical well-being and mental health of children; yet crowding increases tension and nervousness. Children fatigue more quickly. Increased bustle and noise in halls, lunchroom and playground tire children as well as teachers. The classroom atmosphere should be conducive to a thoughtful approach to work and to sustained effort, but crowding makes it difficult to concentrate and inattention is actually encouraged because a child must become immune to many sounds.

A sense of worth and self-respect is essential both to personal development and to learning; yet constantly being in large groups implies that no one child is very important, and for some individuals, such a feeling can contribute to a destructive self-image. Constantly being in large groups also deprives the child of the individual attention from the teacher, which is necessary if the child is to feel reasonably secure and if his particular needs in learning and personal growth are to be detected and provided for. Most of the time, a child learns over a bridge of human relationships. If the relationship between teacher and pupil becomes extremely diluted through the number of persons to whom the teacher is relating himself, then the learning situation is weakened.

We know that rapid learners and talented youngsters need to have their abilities discovered and nurtured. Yet when children are kept in large groups, it is difficult (a) for the potential abilities to be called into play, (b) for teachers to be always alert enough to detect

fleeting signs, (c) for teachers to gather resources and create opportunities that will stimulate the further growth of abilities. Furthermore, children with high energy output, whose abilities are often prized in small groups, tend to become a problem in large classes.

We know that pupils struggling with developmental tasks and the demands of self-control need guidance and patience from teachers. But discipline problems tend to increase in large classes, for the sheer proximity of people invites minor troubles and annoyances and overstimulation occurs for the more excitable children. The fragile hold on self-control is easily lost. The disturbing situation becomes a drain on the physical and emotional strength of both teachers and pupils.

. . . To the Teachers

As indicated in the preceding paragraph, teachers are unable to fulfill their obligations and use their professional potential when classes are crowded. They live constantly with a sense of bafflement, for on the one hand their professional judgment is pointing to what needs to be done for each individual or challenging the teacher to find out what needs to be done, while, on the other hand, the presence of large numbers tends to obscure the individual, making it difficult to detect needs. Large amounts of time and energy must go to routine explanations and activities of daily living in the classroom. Teachers feel pressed by the conflicting demands. In turn hurried, harassed teachers affect learning conditions adversely.

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Perhaps the most detrimental effect upon teachers is the ultimate loss of energy. Teachers are sustained and re-energized when they see pupils grow. To detect a child's needs at the growing edge of his abilities, to help create situations and locate resources that meet the needs, and to appraise the child's progress and next needs is the cycle that vitalizes teaching. When the relationship between teacher and learner is greatly diluted because time and energy have to be diffused over too large a group, the cycle of perceiving needs—providing opportunity and resources—appraising progress is retarded and sometimes lost. Consequently the teacher cannot experience clearly the renewal of energy that should give him strength and zest for the next day's work.

At the same time teachers are often deprived of the energy that comes from creativity. As indicated below, procedures tend to become routinized in large group work and hence the energy-giving satisfactions of a creative approach to problems are rarely achieved.

. . . To Procedures and Program

Children need insightful teachers who have time to use their professional skill and judgment. Teaching is a creative art; judgment is constantly at work. Clarity of purpose or goal setting, knowledge of many means of achieving the goals, and awareness of the individual's status are involved in the exercise of judgment. Method is not the daily following of fixed procedures but is, rather, a creative quandary in which teachers and pupils choose means for reaching goals.

Yet, what usually happens in large classes? Variety of method is curtailed and procedures tend to become routinized in order to save the few minutes needed for explaining or devising an im-

proved way. Those things which require unbroken time blocks such as careful teacher-pupil planning, democratic procedures, constructive activities, field trips, and art are reduced. There is a tendency to fall back on minimum standards as a basis on which the classroom is conducted. Methods become more formal. Mass teaching is more often used. Fewer provisions are made for individual differences; hence slower achievers are frequently frustrated and rapid learners are stultified.

Regimentation, apparently necessary for the mere management of large numbers, sets in. A crowded classroom produces not only conformity with necessary rules but seems to spill over into a kind of meaningless uniformity of activity. There is little opportunity for creative work.

The quality of children's work tends to decline. We know that teacher-pupil evaluation of progress and analysis of the nature of difficulties being encountered are essential to learning; yet in crowded situations teachers and pupils can seldom examine work carefully enough and analyze progress sufficiently to promote optimum growth.

. . . To the Home and Community

For the child there should be continuity of effort and understanding among home, school and community. Yet for large classes, home visits on the part of the teacher are usually at a minimum and parent-teacher conferences at school are often brief and hurried. Communication is limited, and consequently the child loses the benefit of the mutual understanding and constructive planning that should have developed. Also, when large classes prevail, teachers have less time for cooperative work with the

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along to the board of education for approval, rejection or modification. Most members of the planning group are working on one or more of the study committees. Moreover, the school teams report back regularly to their constituent schools and neighborhoods on the progress made on the problems under consideration. In this process new ideas and suggestions are constantly under examination. Problems dealing with safety, teachers' salaries, school sites, naming of new schools, planning of school buildings, bond issues, millage campaigns, curricular offerings, and extending school services during the summer months have been handled by this planning group.

Need for Theory and Strategy

The time has come to give more attention to theory and to long-range objectives. When citizen participation is looked on as a way to get out of a community conflict or to put over a bond issue, the very process is degraded. Emphasis should be placed on the essential nature of democracy—on the basic rights of the interested citizen. Education, being a matter of great public concern, should be planned by all members of the community. Without participation in educational planning, only the most common and traditional of needs may be perceived and met.

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community agencies bearing upon children's welfare and for participation in community activities.

In crowded classes there are usually few opportunities for children to use initiative and develop resourcefulness. These lost opportunities have an important, even if deferred, impact upon our

In recent years citizen participation has centered to a great extent on producing enough classrooms to meet the needs (quantitative) of the next year. This kind of participative action is good but not enough. The problems that are related to the *quality* of education must be given more attention.

The citizens and the professionals who are ready to deal with strategy should try to direct attention to planning in such fields as these:

1. Program or curriculum planning
2. Personnel policies that will develop highly professionalized teachers
3. An advanced concept of method and instructional organization such as the operation of the career teacher in a self-contained classroom
4. Developing a consensus on the roles of educational institutions
5. Developing a consensus on the goals and nature of education in a free society
6. Continuously evaluating and re-planning the total community program of education.

The waste motion in education today and the need for considerable change in the educational program call for public study and discussion of issues as grand as those posed by Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann in earlier times.

communities. In a democratic society improvement in the quality of living is the responsibility of all citizens; hence creativity and initiative are the very qualities that the classroom needs to encourage in youth, not only for their present values but also for the future of our society. Yes, crowding makes a difference, for the future and the present.

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