INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE
Los Angeles Unified School District

INFORMATIVE

TO: Members, Board of Education Date: June 30, 2006

FROM: Randy Ross
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SUBJECT: $10 MILLION CLASS SIZE REDUCTION INITIATIVE

Ten years ago, California began spending $1 billion-plus a year to enable all districts to lower the sizes of their K-3 classrooms from an average of about 30 students to a maximum of 20 students. *Perhaps the most important lesson from this initiative is that, with certainty,* ***while all K-3 teachers benefited, all students did not*** *– especially students in high-poverty communities.* Unfortunately, the class size reduction program spawned a market for teachers that predictably diminished the quality and stability of the teacher workforce in inner-city schools.

In this light, this Informative alerts the Board that the $10 million class size reduction proposal included in the 2006-07 Provisional Budget potentially suffers from similar downsides. The basis for this concern is explained below.

The Superintendent's proposal would reduce class sizes for 8th and 9th grade math (algebra) classes. At PHBAO schools, the size of these classes would be reduced by four students (from 32 to 28 students), while class sizes would be reduced by 4.5 students (37.5 to 32) at Desegregated Receiver schools. This proposal is fueled by the premise that smaller classes for algebra instruction will enable greater personal contact between teachers and students and thus promote improved educational outcomes.

This notion makes sense, provided certain critical conditions prevail:

(1) The sizes of classes are reduced sufficiently to make a difference in teacher behavior and student achievement;
(2) Sufficient numbers of effective teachers are available to teach algebra and related courses.
(3) Implementation of the class size reduction initiative does not diminish the overall quality of math teachers in LAUSD schools; and
(4) Implementation of the class size reduction initiative does not exacerbate the inequitable distribution of math teachers among LAUSD schools.

It is not clear that the current proposal would meet these conditions. Most research on class size reduction has been done for the elementary grades. This research concludes that a class size in excess of 18 students does not yield significant benefits. LAUSD's

Program Evaluation and Research Branch (PERB) has published a few studies regarding the impact of class size reduction. One PERB analysis (Penny Fidler, 2001) concluded that LAUSD's implementation of the State of California's class size reduction (CSR) program had generally positive, yet mixed, effects on student achievement. PERB's analysis of LAUSD's implementation of Federal Class Size Reduction (Samuel C. Gilstrap, December 2003) found mixed results regarding the impact of small (20 students) eighth grade English classes on student achievement.[1]

Beyond LAUSD, an important study undertaken by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) offers a nuanced analysis of the effects of California's class size reduction program. The study found that CSR raised the test performance of third graders in math (4 percentage points) and reading (3 percentage points) and that "schools with more low-income students likely receive larger benefits." However, "schools in rural areas and those in which a high proportion of the students are black (primarily in Los Angeles Unified School District) appear to benefit little if at all from smaller classes."[2]

Given the mixed results of prior studies of the impact of class size reduction, it is not clear that teaching an algebra class of 28 students would differ remarkably from teaching one with 37 students. Indeed, California's Morgan-Hart Class Size Reduction Act dictates that "the average class size for the school year at each participating school can be no more than 20:1 per certificated teacher and no more than 22 pupils enrolled in any participating class." The upshot is that the proposed reductions in class size for 8th and 9th grade math may be insufficient to significantly to improve achievement, other things being equal.

Of greater concern is the impact of this initiative on the quality of math teaching in the district, particularly at hard-to-staff secondary schools. Documentation on the Diploma Project notes that the District's ability to effectively implement the 8th to 9th grade class size reduction initiative "depends on funding, availability of physical space, and availability of qualified teachers." Math (along with science and special education) teachers have been perennially in short supply in LAUSD (and other districts). In this regard, the algebra class size reduction initiative raises several key questions: What is the source of the new "highly qualified" teachers that will be needed to implement this program? Will sufficient numbers spring from local schools of education? Will they come from other school districts? Within LAUSD, will math teachers be lured away from inner-city secondary schools?

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[1] On one hand, the report notes that "Though the average size of eight grade English classes dropped during the three-year period which Federal Class Size Reduction was in effect, no systematic change was observed in the performance of eighth graders on achievement tests when compared to their sixth and seventh grade counterparts." On the other hand, the report finds that "Middle school students in small classes (maximum 20:1 ratio) gained significantly more on the Stanford 9 reading test than students in large classrooms (minimum 26:1) in 2002." (From Samuel C. Gilstrap, "Final Report on the Evaluation of Federal Class Size Reduction in LAUSD: Classroom Characteristics, Teacher Perspectives, and Student Outcomes," PERB, December 2, 2003, p. iv.

[2] Christopher Jepsen and Steven Rivkin, "Class Size Reduction, Teacher Quality, and Academic Achievement in California Public Elementary Schools," Public Policy Institute of California, 2002, p. xi.

Given California's and LAUSD's experience in implementing the state's K-3 class size reduction program over the past decade, it is easy to predict that a class size reduction program would diminish the capacity of inner-city secondary schools to attract and retain high quality math teachers. Likewise, the 8th – 9th grade class size reduction program for math classes could also cause rising intra-district inequities in the distribution of teachers. As the PPIC study notes (p. xii), "the schools that do not appear to benefit from class size reduction are the same schools that had trouble hiring experienced, certified teachers before (the program)."

In spite of the District's persistent efforts to help, many schools continue to suffer long and deep the challenge of recruiting and retaining effective teachers. A host of incentives are available to teachers who teach in low-performing, inner-city schools. A good example of an effective approach is the financial incentive offered by the state ($20,000 over four years) to encourage National Board Certified (NBC) teachers to teach in low-performing schools. In addition to the current spate of programs designed to support the recruitment and retention of effective teachers, the Provisional Budget includes a few notable additions. One initiative would use dollars from the state's Teacher Recruitment and Student Support Program (TRSS) to provide additional incentives to high-demand teachers (math, science, and special education) to work in the District's lowest performing schools. In addition, the District plans to resurrect the Priority Staffing Program (PSP) by assigning PSP teacher advisers to 22 PI 4 and 5 schools to facilitate teacher recruitment, hiring, support, and retention. It's not yet clear how these efforts relate to extant strategies employed by the District to facilitate improved teacher quality and retention. Ultimately, what's needed are irresistible packages of monetary and non-monetary incentives that render low-achieving schools great places to work. But the dense panoply of incentive programs we now have in place suggests that we don't yet know how to develop compelling incentive packages for teachers. As a result, while programs such as TRSS and PSP may be helpful, it is not clear they will be sufficiently robust to overcome the teacher redistributional effects that would likely culminate from the 8th –9th grade class size reduction initiative.

The importance of such teacher redistributional effects are made evident in a recent report I prepared for the Board's Educational Equity Committee that explored the connection between CAHSEE pass rates and the quality of the teaching forces in high schools. That analysis concluded that a 10 percent increase in the percent of continuing/permanent teachers (measure of teacher quality) would lead to a 5 percent increase in a school's CAHSEE pass rate. Likewise, a 10 percent reduction in the proportion of continuing/permanent teachers would have the reverse effect. While implementation of the 8th – 9th class size reduction program could precipitate such negative effects for hard-to-staff high schools, it is doubtful that the potential benefits of smaller classes would overcome this potential harm.

Accordingly, I urge the Board to insist that the Superintendent develop a report that explains in detail how the $10 million 8th to 9th grade class size reduction initiative will be implemented in a way that will help rather than harm students at hard-to-staff schools.

Moreover, if the class size reduction proposal goes forward, the Board should insist that the Superintendent annually report on its implementation as well as the teacher dynamics that it may precipitate (e.g., changes in the distribution of high quality teachers in secondary schools, changes in the teacher turnover rate). Such vigilance will help to insure that all students will have equal access to a high-quality college-prep curriculum.

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