

Learning capacity



By John Foster

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When officials announced plans in April to tighten the school district's budget and layoff more than 50 teachers, they speculated that employing fewer teachers would increase the student-teacher ratio for Oldham County Schools district-wide by one student. Students, teachers and parents are now seeing evidence of it. At OCMS and other schools, fewer teachers means 32 students (or more) in a classroom equipped for 25.

When she first heard she'd be teaching classes of 38 and 39 students, South Oldham High School teacher Alison Moulder said she was a little intimidated.

"My first thought was, 'Wow! That's a lot of kids,'" she said.

Her largest class previously was about 32 or 33 students, but she didn't want to turn away students wanting to take AP English Literature. So she set about adding a desk to each row in her classroom, explained to students the importance of not talking over each other and got to teaching.

She said it's worked out fine so far. The wide range of opinions and philosophies have made for more lively discussions, she said, and with AP students discipline isn't much of an issue.

She also has one class of 18 students. The dynamic is a little quieter and she's able to give their writing more personal attention. She said she's already figured out those students' strengths and weaknesses as writers. The other class — well, it's going to take a little more time, just like it may take two periods to conference with them on their writing instead of getting it all in one period.

"At the end of the day it is what it is," she said. "You just try to take a positive approach to it and do the best you can."

The large classes are a symptom of the teacher cuts Superintendent Paul Upchurch announced last spring. In order to balance a tight budget, he announced that the student to teacher ratio in the district would increase to 23-to-1 from 22-to-1.

But that doesn't mean every class has 23 students. Some have 59, some have 16. At South Oldham High School, the average class without considering special education includes 29 students.

For the 2006-07 school year, average class size had 27. That range of 26 or 27 students per class is ideal in high school, Principal Dorenda Neihof said, but not possible right now.

That doesn't mean every class has gotten larger. Math classes have actually gotten about half a student smaller on average in that time.

The rest have ticked up, with English classes making the largest gain in size, as Neihof cut an English teacher as part of balancing her ratio.

Although English classes of 39 are new, it's nothing new for high schools to have uneven class sizes. It's the byproduct of allowing students to custom tailor their high school experience. Some classes are going to be more popular than others and some classes are going to fit into students' schedules better than others.

It creates a situation where band has 59 students because it doesn't make much sense to have the band practicing during two separate periods. On the other end of the spectrum, yearbook only has 19 students. But you can't do away with the yearbook, Neihof said.

She also decided not to cut AP Spanish although only 15 students signed up. An AP foreign language credit is required in order to earn the Commonwealth Diploma, she explained.

AP Government did have to go. Only 14 students wanted to take it, not enough to justify the cost, Neihof said.

If the district had money for more teachers, then maybe.

Middle school

At the middle school level, a variation in class sizes isn't an issue — all classes are big.

Oldham County Middle School administrators had to file waivers with the state to exceed the state limits on class sizes. Not only did they cut four teachers, but more students than expected showed up for the start of school. Classes throughout the school are about 29 to 30 students as two or three more students pack into each class.

"Two, three or four extra students does change the complexion of a class," principal Chris Kraft said.

Seventh-grade math teacher Carrie McElfresh has 31 or 32 students in each of her classes, compared to 25 or 30 in 2008-09. Every desk in her room is full. If she adds any more students, someone will have to sit at the computer until a desk can be scrounged up, she said.

More importantly, it sometimes is impossible to get around to everyone's question, she said.

"I think it shortchanges the kids," she said.

But they adjust and do the best they can, she said. Some teachers use comment slips that students can write on to make sure all questions are answered.

A new 30-minute enrichment period built into the schedule makes it possible for students to receive extra help if they need.

"The bottom line," Craft said, "is everyone would like smaller classes, but we just roll on. It's what we do."

North Oldham Middle School science teacher Tammy Smith has also made some adjustments to her teaching as a result of classes larger by about three or four students.

First of all, it's important to let students know right away that they may have to wait a little longer for their question to be answered by the teacher.

"We establish that right off the bat," she said.

And sometimes she has to adjust plans to fit a larger class. In past years, she's done lab activities at different times for measuring liquid volume and measuring dimensions. But with this year's classes, she divided the class in half and did both activities at the same time so everyone would stay busy.

"You just have to get creative logistically," she said.

North Oldham Middle School Principal Robb Smith said the affects of larger classes at his school have been negligible. He's more impressed with the instruction he's observed this year than ever before, he said.

"For us, it really hasn't been noticeable," he said.

Examples of class sizes in Oldham County high schools

English 39

Band 59

Yearbook 19

AP Spanish 15

Classes like AP Government are some of those cut due to lack of interest. Only 14 people signed up – "not enough to justify the cost," SOHS principal Dorenda Neihof said.

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