



Testimony Presented to Philadelphia City Council

By Donna Cooper

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this hearing that is finally shining a spotlight in our schools, where our children are subjected to unacceptable experiences that border on the obscene.

Let me begin by saying that as bad as things seem on Abbott Elementary, they are far worse in real life. As you've heard, the standard elementary school class is 30 students for grades three and lower and 1:33 for grades four and above. If the size of our classes were accurately depicted on national TV, the show would shift the show from a full-fledged comedy to an unwatchable national tragedy.

We need to support measures that will reduce the size of our elementary school classes to create a more joyful learning environment, doing so will result in happier teachers who want to teach in our schools for the long term.

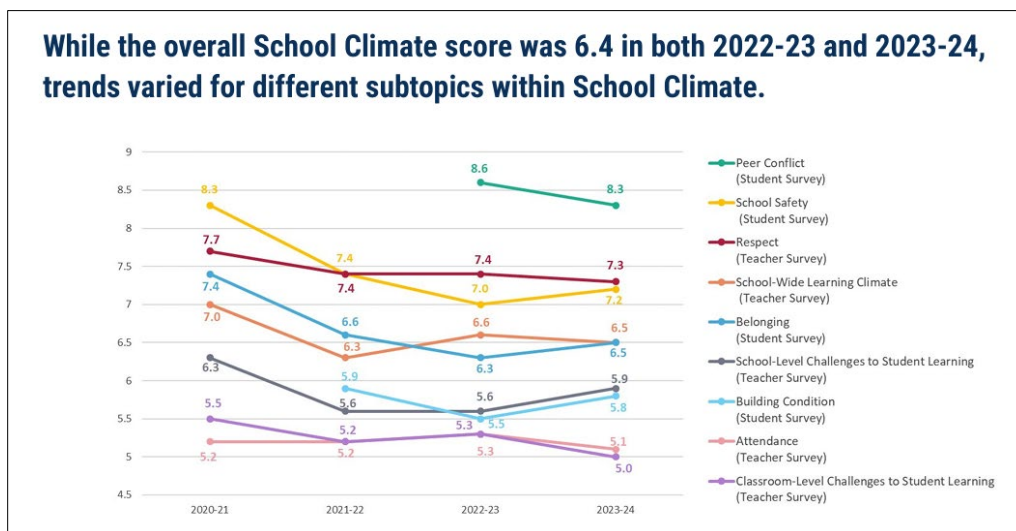
Research on the impact of mandatory class size reduction in New York State, forcing elementary school classes to be reduced from 23 to 20 students per teacher, found that teacher retention improved by 4.2 percentage points. Put simply, this study found that teachers are less likely to leave school when they have smaller classes. If only our class sizes were capped at 23, let alone achieving the New York cap of 20 students per teacher, our schools would be more joyful. Given the persistently high rates of teacher vacancies in the district, this research demonstrates that a proven way to reduce teacher turnover would be to revive the joy of teaching across the district is to provide the resources to bring class sizes down to the size where a teacher can create learning settings.

That research also found that turnover costs per teacher were about \$4,000. Entering this school year the district had 400 vacancies which means that far more than 400 teachers left the district in the prior school year. Imagine all the recess equipment, filtration stations, revitalized school yards, music, art, and athletic supplies that could be purchased with the \$1.6 million had the district been able to avoid the annual costs of high teacher attrition driven in large part by class sizes that are unmanageable and zap the joy of teaching.

The absence of joy in our understaffed and under-resourced schools is plain as day in the annual Philly School Experience Survey that last year 94,000 students, teachers, parents, and other key stakeholders connected to our schools completed. School Climate surveys offer a clear window showing us the depth of joy or joylessness. The components of School Climate that students evaluate are:

- Belonging
- Building Conditions
- Peer Conflict
- School Safety

In every indicator our students told the district that things were worse in last year, SY 2024, than they were in SY 2020.



In fact, the situation might be the same in every school, but our students are experiencing things as worse and clearly less joyful. It's too hard to learn and too hard to be prideful in yourself and your school when there aren't enough teachers to help you succeed. That's why this council wants to be able to take pride in a joyful school district, there is no more urgent cause than ensuring the school district has the funds to reduce the size of our classes in elementary school.

Beyond having enough traditional teachers who want to be here with our students in classes where they can connect and help learning thrive, the common thread of research on education reinforces the simple notion that schools that tap into a child's passion are schools where kids are passionate being in school.

That passion might be academics, and the potential of that passion rests with the capacity of their classroom teacher, or that passion can be sparked by arts and sports. So many amazing educators I know say that it was the art class that got them to school every week, or playing football got them to attend school regularly and graduate. Arts teaches and coaches are essential players in helping students stoke their passion and stay focused on the academics enough so they can do what they love.

Tapping passion is all about joy. For the kids whose passion is unleashed by the arts, our district is doing what it can with the limited resources. Let me break that down. There are 424 arts teachers in the district, some music, some visual arts, and there are 75 itinerant art teachers who rove among schools for music specialties. For the arts teachers working full-time in the schools, that's one arts teacher for every 400 students.

Fortunately, the School Board has made tracking progress to increase access to arts education as a priority in its Guardrail 2 Creating Enriching and Well-Rounded School Experiences. The district's data tracking on that guardrail from 2022 indicates that 103 of the 170 schools educating students in grades K through eight, or 60% of those schools, offer only art or music to students, not both. That's not a recipe for joy.

When it comes to athletics, one of the biggest motivators to keep our students close to their schools, we simply have no data. A cursory review of the high school inventory published by the district shows the sports options at most high schools are depressing limited.

Let me conclude with two big takeaways. First, the parents testifying today make it clear that policies that promote joy are needed. Happier students mean happier faculty and together they create a virtuous cycle of reinforcing the love being in school. This Council should do all it can to encourage the district to adopt those policies to the extent they don't require substantial new investment.

Second, most of the policies that Children First many of the parents have outlined require that the state and the city step to the plate and boost funding for the district. The district is more than \$1 billion underfunded. That is not Children First's estimate of what is needed; this is the conclusion of the school funding formula enacted with bipartisan support in the PA Legislature. We are thrilled to be a member of an effective statewide advocacy campaign that delivered nearly \$300 million in new state funds for the Philadelphia School District last year. And we hope to do the same this year.

Those funds are one half of the ingredients needed for a school district full of joyful students; the other half comes from this august body. Based on the testimony presented today, I hope this Council will add additional funds for the Philadelphia School District to the budget and not take any action on taxation that now or in the future restrains your ability to invest more in our students.

Please consider two facts. One: the full elimination of the BIRT will take \$726 million off the table, restraining your ability to meet the needs of our students in the future. Two: before 1976, the share of milage transferred to the district was 60% - today it stands at 56%. If Council returns the city contribution to the 1976 level, more than \$80 million could be invested in our students annually.

I urge you to keep the needs of our students and their joy as your North Star. They are the key to a vibrant future of this city where poverty and crime are low, and prosperity and joy are high.