

Intelligence MEMOS



From: David Johnson
To: Ontarians Concerned about Class Sizes
Date: December 12, 2019
Re: **TIME TRAVELLING IN THE ONTARIO SECONDARY SCHOOL SYSTEM**

How do we think about proposed changes in the number of teachers in the Ontario secondary school system, a central element in the current negotiations between government and teachers? A journey back in time may be helpful.

There are two categories of secondary school teachers: full-time (FT); and long-term occasional (LTO). The percentage of teachers on LTO contracts has ranged from a high of 7.7 percent in 2017/18 to a low of 4.6 percent in 2011/12. The analysis below includes LTO teachers back to 2006/07.

The Figure illustrates the number of students enrolled in the secondary school system divided by the total number of teachers. Between 2006/07 and 2015/16 that number fluctuates in a very narrow band between 15.26 and 15.46 students per teacher. Teaching resources per student were identical for a decade.

Then, in 2016/17 the student-teacher ratio drops abruptly to 14.98 and then again very slightly to 14.86 in 2017/2018. There are no data after 2017/18.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) proposes maintaining class sizes, a number closely related to the number of students per teacher, at their 2018/19 levels. This would likely maintain the ratio of students to teachers at a much lower level into the future than in the period from 2006/07 to 2015/16. Barring a dramatic change between 2017/18 and 2018/19 that was certainly not public, the OSSTF proposal would seem to make the reduction in the number of students per teacher in 2016/17 permanent.

The numbers for the proposed reductions in all teachers, elementary and secondary, across the province fall into a wide range depending on the source quoted. A Ministry [memo](#) in March 2019, after making the assumption that secondary school classes would increase from 22 to 28 students on average, presented a total reduction of 1,558 teachers in one year and 3,475 in five years. The initial reductions proposed in March were not split between elementary and secondary teachers. Meanwhile, the Financial Accountability Office (FAO) of Ontario [estimated](#) a one-year reduction of 1,959 secondary teachers from 2018/19 to 2019/20, jumping to 9,000 by 2023/24 if the government's plan to increase class size from 22 to 28 and increase e-learning went forward as announced in March. Since then, the proposed increase in average class size has been reduced from 28 to 25, and e-learning requirements loosened. Using the class size of 25, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives [calculated](#) a loss of 4,900 secondary teaching positions by 2023/24 using a forecast of secondary enrolment similar to the enrolment level in 2017/18. A loss of 4,900 teachers would raise the student to teacher ratio to about 16.8, certainly higher than any ratio observed since 2006/07. What else can be learned from Ontario's historical experience in secondary school staffing?

A reduction of 1,570 teachers in 2017/18 (the FAO one-year estimate) would return secondary schools to the level of resources in 2015/16, about 15.4 students per teacher. If we travelled back just two years to the teaching staff levels that had been in place then and through the previous decade, are we travelling into a disaster? The Figure suggests not, at least along one dimension.

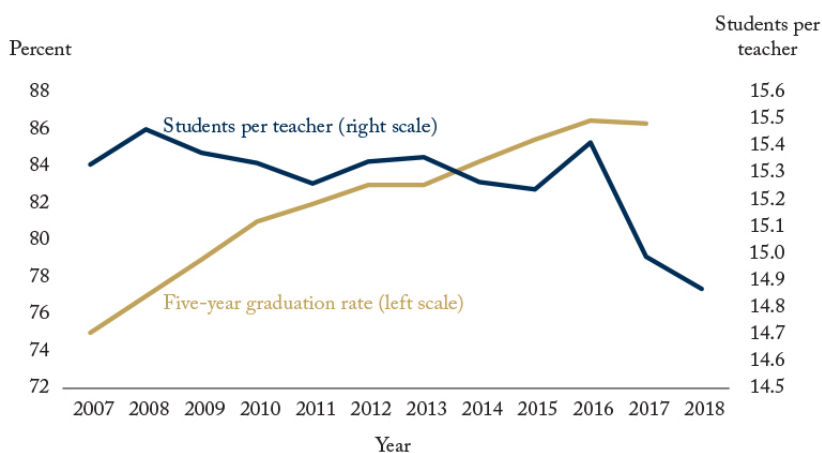
The percentage of students who graduated increased from 73 percent to 86.5 percent with no addition of significant teaching resources between 2006/07 and 2015/16. By this measure, the system improved without additional teachers per student.

The range of staffing and outcomes observed in the last 12 years do not give guidance on how the system would work if the student to teacher ratio increased from 15.4 (the average from 2006/07 to 2015/16) to 16.8 as calculated by the Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Without clear evidence on secondary school class sizes and student outcomes, we simply do not know if an increase in average class sizes at the secondary level from 22 to 25 and the loss of 4,900 teachers would have a significant impact on educational outcomes in Ontario.

We do know, however, that the loss of 1,570 secondary school teachers would return the system to teaching staff levels in place for the most of the last decade, not some perilously unknown time in a deep and dark past.

Figure 1: Resources and Outcomes in Ontario Secondary Schools



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Source: Prepared by the author from data in Education Facts (various years) and further data provided by the Ministry of Education.