

# small classes, big impact: why class size matters at aelo swiss academy

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Early in my teaching career, I had a student I will call Lena. She was fourteen, punctual, neat, polite, and almost entirely invisible. I taught her in a class of twenty-nine, in a room built for twenty-four, and I will be honest with you: some weeks I am not sure I spoke ten sentences directly to her. She never caused trouble. Her work arrived on time and sat reliably in the middle of the pile. When her mother came to the parent evening and asked, gently, whether her daughter was happy, I realized I could describe Lena's handwriting but not her laugh.

I think about Lena more than about almost any other student I taught, because she is the reason I came to care so much about a number that schools rarely put at the center of the conversation. Class size sounds like an administrative detail, a line in a budget. It is not. It is the variable that most reliably decides whether a child gets to be known.

## the arithmetic of attention

Start with the uncomfortable math. Take a forty-five minute lesson. In a class of twenty-eight, if a teacher divided her attention perfectly evenly, each child would get a little under two minutes of it. Attention is never divided evenly, of course. It flows to the students who demand it: the ones who raise their hands, the ones who are struggling loudly, the ones whose behavior makes the lesson impossible otherwise. The quiet, competent child in the middle gets the leftovers. Multiply that across a week, a term, a year, and you can see how a fourteen-year-old becomes handwriting without a laugh.

Now run the same lesson with twelve students. Even a distracted, imperfect teacher cannot avoid the people in that room. The child at the back is three steps away, not ten. There is time to kneel beside a desk, to read a paragraph over a shoulder, to ask a second question when the first answer is not quite right.

The arithmetic shows up in the less glamorous parts of teaching, too. Twenty-eight essays of five hundred words each is fourteen thousand words to read on a Sunday. Most teachers in that position skim, circle a few errors, and write "good effort" at the bottom, because the alternative is not sleeping. Twelve essays is six thousand words. That can be read twice. That can be answered with a sentence the student will actually remember on Monday. Feedback quality is not a function of teacher virtue. It is a function of how many students a teacher is carrying.

Small classes also change what a teacher can hear. She can hear every child read aloud every week. She can notice that a boy who is normally cheerful goes quiet on Fridays. She can notice the friendship rupture that happened in the corridor on Tuesday and will otherwise poison the next three months. None of this requires genius. It only requires proximity, and proximity is what class size buys.

## what the research says, and what it does not

If you have ever looked into class size research, you will know it is messier than the brochures suggest, and I want to respect that honesty rather than paper over it.

The most famous evidence comes from Tennessee in the mid-1980s, in a large experiment known as the STAR project. Thousands of children from kindergarten through third grade were assigned to either small classes of roughly thirteen to seventeen students or regular classes in the low to mid-twenties. The children in smaller classes made measurable gains in reading and mathematics. The gains were strongest for children from less

advantaged backgrounds, and they persisted after the students moved back into larger classes. That last finding matters most to me. Something happens in a small room that a child carries forward.

The caveats are real, though. The effects were modest, not miraculous. And when California tried statewide class size reduction in the 1990s, results were mixed, partly because districts had to hire thousands of teachers almost overnight and preparation suffered. The lesson I draw from that failure is not that class size is unimportant. It is that class size multiplies teacher quality; it cannot replace it. A small class gives a good teacher room to be excellent. It does not rescue bad teaching.



That is why, when families ask me whether small classes guarantee a better education, I say no, nothing guarantees it. The honest version is: small classes make good teaching dramatically more likely, because they remove the noise, the crowds, and the triage that force even excellent teachers into survival mode.

## what actually changes when the room gets smaller

The research tells you that small classes help. It does not tell you why, and the why is where a school either earns its class sizes or wastes them.

In a small class, a teacher can check understanding properly. Not "does everyone get it?", which is answered only by the two most confident students in any room, but a real sweep of every student, every lesson. She can ask a shy student a direct question in a tone that carries no threat, because in a room of twelve, being asked something is normal rather than a spotlight moment. She can tell the difference between thinking-silence and drowning-silence, which is one of the hardest judgments in teaching and one that is nearly impossible to make about a child you only know as a face in a crowd.

Small classes also change the speed of repair. In a large class, a teacher discovers in week six that a student misunderstood something from week two. In a small class, she discovers it on the same afternoon, while the confusion is still fresh and fixable in ninety seconds. Education is largely a race between small problems and small interventions, and class size decides who wins that race.

And there is the knowing. A teacher with twelve students knows whose grandmother is ill, who has a tournament on Saturday, who is frightened of fractions because of an incident in grade four that nobody ever untangled. I once taught a boy who did not speak voluntarily for the first six weeks of the year. In a class of twenty-eight, I would have labeled him and moved on. In a class of eleven, I could afford to wait, to keep the door open, to notice in week seven that he wrote something quietly brilliant about a poem and to say so, privately, without

ceremony. He started talking the following week. Nothing clever happened. He simply got seen at the right moment, and there were enough calm moments available for me to catch it.

## **a swiss idea, taken seriously**

Switzerland has always had a soft spot for the individual path. The apprenticeship tradition, the way young people are trusted with real responsibility early, the conviction that a sixteen-year-old's next step should fit that particular sixteen-year-old rather than a statistical average. That respect for the person is woven into the culture here, and it is one of the things families move to Switzerland for.

The reality, though, is that even excellent state school systems operate under numbers that vary by canton and year, and classes in the low to mid-twenties are common. A system can believe in the individual and still, through simple arithmetic, struggle to deliver individual attention.

At AELO Swiss Academy, we take the Swiss respect for the individual seriously enough to make it structural rather than aspirational. Small classes are not a marketing feature for us. They are the architecture. If a class is small enough that a teacher knows every student's story by October, then everything else we believe in, close feedback, honest communication with families, teaching at the pace of the actual learner rather than the pace of the syllabus, becomes possible instead of theoretical.

This matters doubly in a multilingual country. Many students here are studying in their second or even third language, and language is a skill that grows through speaking, not through listening. In a class of twelve, every student produces sentences aloud, several times, every lesson. In a class of twenty-eight, a shy student learning in a new language can go days without being asked to say a full sentence. Over a year, that difference compounds into two entirely different educations.

## **the part that never makes it into the brochure**

There is an emotional dimension to class size that research papers struggle to capture, and parents sense it immediately when they walk into a room.

Being wrong in a large class is a public event. Twenty-seven pairs of eyes turn. The moment gets remembered at lunch. Being wrong in a small class is ordinary; it passes in seconds, someone laughs kindly, the lesson moves on. Children calibrate their willingness to take intellectual risks on exactly this difference. A student who feels safe being wrong will attempt harder problems, ask stranger questions, and think out loud, and thinking out loud is where most real learning happens.

Then there is belonging. Adolescence can be a lonely business, and a child who spends seven years as an anonymous face in a crowd often concludes, without ever saying it, that anonymity is what she deserves. A small class quietly refutes that conclusion every single morning.

I also want to be honest about the flip side, because it exists. Small classes are intense. There is nowhere to hide. For a child who has learned to cope by being invisible, the first weeks of being seen and addressed daily can feel exposing, even unwelcome. Good schools know this and build safety deliberately: predictable routines, teachers who never use a wrong answer as entertainment, and patience with the long thaw. When we admit a student at AELO Swiss Academy, we expect to spend the first weeks earning trust, not demanding it. The intensity is a feature, but only for a child who has first been given a reason to trust the room.

## **the trade-offs, stated plainly**

Families deserve straight talk, so here it is. Small classes cost more, because more teachers per student means more salaries per student. That cost shows up in tuition, and we would rather explain it honestly than pretend it is free.

A class of ten also contains fewer potential best friends than a class of thirty. This is a genuine edge case, and it is the one that parents of sociable, easygoing children sometimes raise with me. The answer lies in how a school builds community around its classes: mixed-age projects, clubs, shared expeditions, and partnerships that widen the circle beyond the form group. A small school can be socially rich, but it has to choose to be.

Finally, a small class does not, by itself, produce a good teacher. A mediocre teacher in a small class is still a mediocre teacher, just closer. The right question is never simply "how many students per class?" but "what does the school do with that ratio?" That is the question we ask ourselves constantly, because class size is an opportunity, and opportunities can be squandered.

## **what we do with the ratio**

The daily practices at AELO Swiss Academy are built to convert small classes into something concrete. Teachers here read every draft, not a sample of drafts, and return work quickly enough that the student still cares about the answer. Someone notices when a normally cheerful child goes quiet, and asks, and tells the family before the grades drop rather than after. A student can be racing ahead in mathematics while needing patient support in French, and neither fact becomes her identity, because the teachers holding both facts are the same two people, talking to each other weekly.

None of this is exotic. It is simply impossible at scale. You cannot read every draft when you teach a hundred and twelve students. You cannot notice the Friday silence in a corridor of four hundred adolescents. Small classes do not make teachers kinder or more perceptive. They make kindness and perception operationally feasible, which [REDIT](#) is the only form in which those qualities reliably exist.

## **questions worth asking on any school tour**

Whether or not you ever visit us, you deserve a way to test what any school tells you. These are the questions I would ask, and the ones I hope parents ask us.

- What is your maximum class size, and what actually happens when a class approaches that number?
- How quickly does written work come back, and what does the feedback look like in practice?
- How do you track a student who is neither failing nor excelling, the easy child to forget?
- How often will my child speak, present, or be asked a direct question in a typical week?
- When a teacher notices something is wrong, who responds, and how soon will I hear about it?

## **what you can see in ten minutes of watching a lesson**

If a school lets you observe, and we think every school should, forget the prospectus and watch for these things instead.

- The teacher uses names constantly, and knows more than names: the story behind each one.
- Quiet students answer questions without flinching, because being asked is routine.
- Errors are handled in seconds, without ceremony, laughter, or damage.
- Student work on the walls and in the