

School safety: School size and class size are factors too

Of the 2,000 students in this building, do you know all of them well? Can you?

Violence can happen anywhere. Mental illness can appear anywhere. Murders can take place anywhere.

This is not an attempt to assert a cause and effect relationship.

It would be foolish to say school size *caused* the tragedies that we have witnessed at a number of large schools.

School	Year	Enrollment
Columbine High School	1998-99	Over 1,800
Arapahoe High School	2013-14	Over 2,270
STEM School Highlands Ranch	2018-19	Over 1,870
Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (FL)	2017-18	3,200 – est.
Santa Fe High School (TEXAS)	2017-18	1,400 – est.

But this I believe: the size of our schools is *a factor* in what has occurred.

In following what the media has reported since the death of Kendrick Castillo at STEM School, almost no one seems to ask: have we designed structures that foster a strong sense of community, that support strong teacher-student relationships, and that make sure every student in our schools is known well? Or have we created oversize buildings and ridiculous teacher-student ratios that actually work against the kind of engagement and sense of belonging we want for each boy and girl who walks into our schools?

A review of ten articles in *The Denver Post* since the shooting at STEM School (see below and pages 3-5) reveals almost no consideration of school size as a problem. Hardly any mention that no adult at the school knew *those* students well, or of faculty and staff not sharing warning signs with their colleagues.

Or, more generally, of ballooning class sizes (28-35) and teacher-student ratios (e.g. 1:160, for some secondary teachers in Douglas County) that makes it almost impossible to know all your students.

It does not have to be this way (see box). And yet we appear to accept such numbers as givens, and shift our attention to school resource officers, security staff – and metal detectors. We build these Big Boxes that make it so hard to create a healthy, positive school community where every young person feels he or she is known well—and then try to fix it how? With more police?

Teaching English in six different schools, I never taught more than 110 students. In two schools I never had more than 65 students; total enrollment in those schools was under 260. The three K-8 schools where I taught were under 500. The least safe? The high school of 1,200 students, in northern Vermont, where frequent bomb scares forced us out into the freezing cold, as lockers were searched.

One story stood out. It dominated page one of *The Denver Post* on June 2. Packed with numbers, ratios.

**Resource vital to safety is limited –
Many Districts Don't Meet Experts' Guidelines**

“The Douglas County district has 2,980 middle and high school students per school resource officer. With 2,425 students per officer, Denver Public Schools has the second-worst ratio.”

“... neither district – nor many metro-area districts of similar size – meet the best practice that school security officers recommended ... of one officer for every 1,000 students...”

“Denver has an SRO or a district security person for every 404 students, Jeffco Public Schools has a 272-1 ratio and Douglas County Public Schools has a 475-1 ratio.”

(A sidebar included such data for 11 other metro areas districts.)

And still more numbers – the *costs* of the SRO program in DPS, *how many* on JeffCo’s security staff But in 70 inches of newsprint, not one word about *the number of students in these buildings*, or the ratio—not of SROs-to-students—but of *teachers-to-students*. (And no need to quote the 1:20 ratio we see reported for many schools on the Colorado Department of Education’s website.* These figures bear no relation to the actual number of students a teacher is responsible for. *That* is the important number.)

That June 2 article in *The Denver Post* also told us:

“The odds that a school will experience a shooting any given year are about one in 35 million, so while SROs and other security staff need to [be] ready to confront an attacker, much of the work they do is building relationships and trying to identify kids who are struggling, said Guy Grace, director of security and emergency preparedness at Littleton Public Schools.”

But – *hello!*—this is what teachers are supposed to do. This is why to be a good teacher is such a tough and incredibly important job! And this is why we need more ... *teachers*. And *smaller classes*.

I have known the challenge of building good relationships with students, and I can only stand in awe of those teachers who can do this successfully with 160 students. Just knowing all of your colleagues in such large institutions must be so difficult. Hardly ideal to build the trust needed for sharing concerns....

“We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.” Winston Churchill

Twenty years ago, after the horrific events at Columbine High, eager to write something constructive in my newsletter, I focused on school size. (I am glad to send a hard copy to anyone interested. AV #9.) I was stunned then, as I am now, that the subject gets so little attention. At the same time, I can see why our first response is to explore whether we have enough SROs, or counselors, or mental health professionals, rather than look at ourselves and ask: *Are the schools we have created partly to blame?*

But ask we must. How can we create schools that are more humane and personal? How we can make a teacher’s job more doable—so that he or she does not succumb to what Ted Sizer called—as he titled one of his books, *Horace’s Compromise*—doing just enough to get by, *while knowing it is not what the students need or deserve?* (**See Addendum B.**) How can we stop thinking about *bigger* schools as *better*?

Ask those teachers who seek to know their students well. If the structures are right (no more than 25 in a class, no more than 110 students), they have great opportunities—in their classroom teaching and one-on-one meetings with students, in advising, in coaching, in leading afterschool clubs—to engage these young people. And to listen. And to be aware—*often*, but no, not always—of potential danger.

But if the structures are poorly designed (as I call a school for 1,500 to 3,000 students—and teacher-to-student ratios of 1:160), you can reduce the SRO-to-student ratio all you want and you have not altered the basic flaw in such large institutions. In such settings some kids will get lost. And perhaps worse.

This past April one look back—as presented by *The Denver Post*, “**20 years after Columbine shooting, little has been accomplished on gun control**” (4/14)—was almost predictable. Of course guns in the wrong hands are a huge problem. But when the tragic shooting at the STEM School in Highlands Ranch took place, our first response continued to focus on *weapons* and *security* and failed to dig more deeply into the “why?” To be sure, we feel compelled to do *something*. But please review these recent articles from *The Denver Post* (May to August). What has been our focus, to date? Aren’t we missing something?

<p>May 12</p>	<p>Letters: Readers respond to school shooting with sympathy, ideas and anger</p> <p>denverpost.com/2019/05/12/letters-readers-respond-to-school-shooting-with-sympathy-ideas-and-anger-5-12-19/</p>	<p>One letter asked: “What if our legislators thought outside the box and started small, with ideas we can all agree on, like metal detectors and armed guards?”</p> <p>MY COMMENT: “Outside the box”? Such thinking still comes from “inside the box” of our huge schools—as if that is how it must be. A fresh approach will mean we stop building schools designed for 2,000 students.</p>
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<p>May 17</p>	<p>Colorado lawmakers create school safety committee after STEM shooting, Sol Pais scare –</p> <p><i>Eight state House and Senate members will hear from experts and consider legislation</i></p> <p>denverpost.com/2019/05/17/stem-shooting-general-assembly/</p>	<p>“The committee will examine issues related to school safety, mental health and preventing threats across the state. It’s expected to seek testimony from a wide range of experts.”**</p> <p>MY COMMENT: Will you invite experts on school size? See three reports in Addendum A. See insights from Ted Sizer - Addendum B.</p>
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<p>May 24</p>	<p>Douglas County may more than double the number of school resource officers in wake of STEM School shooting</p> <p><i>Commissioners will meet Tuesday to decide on whether to provide \$3 million a year for 16 new SROs</i></p> <p>denverpost.com/2019/05/24/stem-shooting-douglas-county-sros/</p>	<p>“The committees, if approved, would focus on safety and protection in the district and on mental health. Each would have nine members and would feature experts in law enforcement and safety technology. At least one of the committees would have parents and students on board.”</p> <p>MY COMMENT: Nice to see the student voice present. But again, no experts on school size?</p>
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<p>May 28</p>	<p>Rift emerges between Douglas County, school officials over strengthening security in wake of STEM shooting</p> <p><i>School board says it cannot “abdicate” its decision-making powers to county commissioners</i></p> <p>denverpost.com/2019/05/28/douglas-county-stem-school-security/</p>	<p>“A power struggle was laid bare Tuesday between Douglas County government officials and leaders of the state’s third-largest school district over how best to allocate millions of new dollars for school security just three weeks after the deadly shooting at STEM School Highlands Ranch.”</p> <p>MY COMMENT: I wish the disputes were about more important matters. Are leaders in Douglas County asking what students experience in large schools? (Enrollment in 8 of our high schools is between 1,600 and 2,300.) Are students known well by the faculty? Do they feel a part of the school community? (See the many studies on student engagement.)</p>
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<p>June 2</p>	<p>“Oh, my God, it was so frustrating”: How Colorado’s last school safety committee failed</p> <p>denverpost.com/2019/06/02/colorado-school-shootings-general-assembly-committee/</p>	<p>MY COMMENT: This article noted that a school safety committee “created just after ... the Arapahoe High School shooting” heard “great testimony,” but accomplished “nothing.” That testimony probably included the report by the University of Colorado Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, which “found three major failures leading up” to the 2013 shooting.</p> <p><i>“The first failure was in school culture. Employees feared negative publicity and violations of FERPA, the federal student privacy law, in talking to each other about student behavior. The report found that administrators and teachers misunderstood the scope of the federal law.”</i></p> <p>denverpost.com/2016/01/18/arapahoe-high-shooting-reports-detail-3-major-failures-in-procedures/</p> <p>MY COMMENT: A school culture where the adults are not sharing highly disturbing behavior of students? Think about that. More—or less—likely in a big school?</p>
<p>June 29</p>	<p>STEM School, Douglas County district reach five-year agreement, with conditions</p> <p><i>District can shorten contract if school doesn’t meet goals</i></p> <p>denverpost.com/2019/06/29/stem-school-douglas-county-charter/</p>	<p>“Some board members were reluctant to give a five-year contract, however, because of concerns about safety after the shooting and about whether the school adequately addressed complaints about its special education services.”</p> <p>MY COMMENT: Fair enough. But again, a symptom — or a root cause – behind the tragedy of May 7?</p>
<p>July 13</p>	<p>Five takeaways from the first meeting of Colorado’s new school safety committee</p> <p><i>Teachers tell lawmakers they need more help</i></p> <p>denverpost.com/2019/07/13/colorado-school-safety-committee-first-meeting/</p>	<p>“Felicidad Fraser, a social worker in an alternative school, said students she works with don’t feel comfortable talking about feelings and concerns with most adults in their school, partially because the adults haven’t listened. She gave an example of a Colombian-American girl who was told not to take a joke so seriously after her teacher told her to go back to Mexico.</p> <p>““Do you think that kid is going to report anything again?” Fraser asked ‘Before kids will tell you anything, they have to trust you. And they don’t trust most of us.’ She said “she and one other social worker try to meet the emotional needs of all students in the alternative school where they work, but they can’t spend enough time with each kid. ‘We triage, triage, triage, triage all day long.’”</p> <p>MY COMMENT: Powerful words, from the classroom — all pointing to trust, relationships, and class size.</p>

<p>July 16</p>	<p>\$10 million for Douglas County school safety could go to mental health support</p> <p><i>Standardizing school equipment and training also a priority</i></p> <p>denverpost.com/2019/07/16/douglas-county-school-safety-10-million/</p>	<p>“Sarah Ericson, director of diversion in the 18th Judicial District, spoke on behalf of a committee that looked for mental health investments.... the group recommends funding culture assessments at all schools willing to participate, and following that up with money for programs on social-emotional learning, suicide prevention and mental health support.”</p> <p>MY COMMENT: Three cheers. Let’s hope a look at the culture of our schools might uncover if there is a different degree of trust, of belonging, of a sense of community in smaller schools. And if so, if that might encourage some rethinking about the schools we design in the future.</p>
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<p>August 7</p>	<p>“Stars of Hope,” increased security greet STEM School students as classes resume 3 months after shooting</p> <p><i>Highlands Ranch school has deployed new safety measures, closed off classrooms where the shootings occurred</i></p> <p>denverpost.com/2019/08/07/stem-school-back-to-school/</p>	<p>“As 1,850 students prepare to start the 2019-20 school year at STEM on Wednesday, some parents and their children are expressing feelings of anxiety and apprehension about going back to school exactly three months to the day after the shooting — and just days after a pair of mass tragedies, in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, shook the nation.</p> <p>“A letter sent to parents ... detailed new safety and security measures in place at STEM School this year, [including]:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Assigning a full-time school resource officer from the Douglas County Sheriff’s Office to campus ... -Having an off-duty deputy direct traffic ... -Increasing the police presence at the school during the first couple weeks of classes ... -Forming a committee to address security, best practices -Adding mental health resources for students, staff and teachers.” <p>MY COMMENT: Three months is, no doubt, too little time to ask the harder questions of what can be done to fundamentally change the structures we create for our students.</p> <p>On the other hand, the shootings at Columbine took place over twenty years ago.</p>
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*In my old school where I still tutor most weeks, CDE’s data reports the Pupil-Teacher FTE Ratio for 2018-19 as 16:1. The reality, though, is that many classes had 26 students this past year.
<https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/2018-19studentteacherratiospdf>

**Such responses are hardly unique to Colorado.
 “The Education Commission of the States reports that 396 bills concerning school safety were introduced this year across 47 states, and 65 of them were enacted. Many of those bills, 153, included provisions related to emergency preparedness. That covers such factors as building security and safety drills.... About a third of the school safety bills introduced dealt with school resource officers, and 88 of them related to guns in schools.”
 (“State Legislators Tackle Broad Basket of Issues on Parents’ Checklist,” *Education Week*, June 19, 2019)
 See also states like Missouri: **School Safety - Task Force Says Every MO School Should Have an Armed Guard.**

Maybe of interest: **AV #129 - Evidence of success from the charter world – smaller high schools** (April 8, 2015).
 Included this statistic: “Average enrollment in the seven high-performing Colorado charter high schools: 392 students.” At website for *Another View* - <https://anotherviewphj.blogspot.com/>

Addendum A - Research on school size

- 1) *"Bigger schools tend to be impersonal, departmentalized and bureaucratic."*
Smaller Schools, Better Performance - Herbert J. Walberg is a University Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago.
- 2) *"We felt that high schools with 600 to 900 students were large enough to offer a full and solid curriculum, but small enough so students were known well by their teachers and didn't get lost in the cracks."*
The Ideal Size - Valerie E. Lee is a professor of education at the University of Michigan.
Both quotes from <https://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/11/does-the-size-of-a-school-matter/>
- 3) **"How important is school size?"** Greatschools.org (March 4, 2016)

Under strengths of small schools: see "Attention to students," "Community," and "Safety"

Attention to students -

Strengths of small schools: Students are less likely to "fall through the cracks" or feel cut off from the school culture. They are more likely to form strong relationships with peers and school staff.

Community -

Strengths of small schools: There is generally more parent involvement and a feeling of belonging.

Safety -

Strengths of small schools: It's easier to spot strangers at small schools; security and discipline are easier to maintain.

From <https://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/school-size/>

Addendum B - Ted Sizer, the Coalition of Essential Schools, and school size

One of America's most well-respected educators of the past 50 years, Ted Sizer's work and words on school size had an impact on Colorado in the early 1990's. The Gates Family Foundation, working with the Colorado Department of Education, supported six high schools redesigning around the 10 principles of Sizer's national Coalition of Essential Schools. One of those principles follows. (All bold below mine.)

Personalization:

*Teaching and learning should be personalized to the maximum feasible extent. Efforts should be directed toward a goal that **no teacher have direct responsibility for more than 80 students in the high school and middle school and no more than 20 in the elementary school.***

<https://larrycuban.wordpress.com/2018/01/02/whatever-happened-to-the-coalition-of-essential-schools/>

Sizer felt strongly about the issue of school size—and anonymity. At a symposium in Baltimore in October of 1987, he offered a summary of the beliefs and practices that informed the coalition's work:

*"You can't treat students like Frank Perdue treats his chickens. We need to respect their differences. ... **As a teacher, you can't have 175 students.** You can't know that many minds and understand how they make mistakes. ... [W]e need to take students seriously. Don't let any kids feel anonymous."* <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/10/29/10mcquillan.h29.html>

From Sizer's book, *Horace's Compromise* (published 1984):

"Most high school students have several teachers who know a bit about them, but no teacher who sees them whole. Unless they are in some limited enclave—such as those made up of special education students, star athletes, students in a highly visible honors track, or habitual troublemakers—they are, for all intents and purposes, anonymous. This ill serves the students, obviously. It also frustrates good teachers." (p. 208-209)

From a tribute by Patrick J. McQuillen, "What Ted Sizer Meant to Us," *Education Week*, Oct. 29, 2009

"Based on the research he conducted in high schools across the country that resulted in Horace's Compromise, Ted highlighted the "compromises" teachers endured while adjusting and adapting to an ineffective system. They were responsible for so many students that they assigned little substantive work. Lacking time to know students well, teachers leveled their expectations to perceived student abilities. To ensure that they "covered" the entire curriculum, many topics were addressed superficially.

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/10/29/10mcquillan.h29.html>

From interview with Educator Sector, conducted by its co-director, Andrew Rotherham: May 3, 2006

ES: What have been the biggest roadblocks?

TS: *Inertia and politics get in the way, they don't give people room to try new things. The system is very conservative and very resistant ... and it's stuck. And there are very, very weak incentives. To [change] we need [more] room [to be creative]; that's the barrier. It is here that school size is so important. An invisible child is a lost child. Human scale is crucial.*

<https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/education-should-be-a-rich-symphony/>

From Rotherham's introduction:

"Theodore R. 'Ted' Sizer has been one of American education's most influential thinkers for over four decades. Perhaps best known as the author of the seminal Horace trilogy advocating radically more engaging high schools for students and teachers, Sizer early in his distinguished career served as dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and headmaster of Phillips Academy (Andover), the nation's oldest boarding high school."

"The nation keeps building vast soulless high schools...."

From a letter by Ted Sizer to me (Oct. 26, 1999), after I sent him AV #9, "Some thoughts following the Columbine tragedy."

Dear Peter,

Belated thanks for "Another View #9." Your argument is right on the on money, or so it seems to me. I must say we at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential Schools (where [his wife] Nancy and I were the co-principals this last year), our first reaction was "There but for the grace of God go we." Such was a reasonable reaction given the fact that no sieve is perfect and that kids can come apart at the seams emotionally for often inexplicable reasons. Nonetheless, knowing our kids well both because we are a small school and because the school is built around a load per teacher which is profoundly "doable," we felt we were in better shape to handle the shock of tragedy. The nation, however, keeps building vast soulless high schools, God save us, in the name of "economy and efficiency."