

Dear Chair Neron and other respective members of the House Committee on Education,

My name is Jacob Jonas-Closs and I am an 8th Grade Social Studies teacher at Robert Gray Middle School in SW Portland. I am submitting testimony asking you to support HB3652.

Robert Gray has around 460 students, so in most years, I am the only 8th Grade Social Studies teacher. This meant I began last school year with two classes of thirty six eighth graders, this required me to set up my classroom with desks all the way from the front to the back of my room, with just enough space to open doors and closets. There was no designated space for my student teacher during these classes, and no room for a “quiet work space” to offer a student who needed to take space from peers. Thirty six eighth grade bodies is difficult on most days, but especially on September days where it is ninety degrees outside. In the end I was fortunate, around the first day of school, my building was given an additional teacher and this would allow me to split up these two larger classes. Unfortunately, this teacher was not able to start for another three weeks. The first three weeks in a middle school classroom involves clearly setting expectations, and building a community where students are able to share ideas with one another and learn how to persevere with their work in the classroom. This split meant I needed to rebuild these classroom communities with a new mix of students after this shuffle occurred, this was not ideal for any 8th Grade teacher at my school. As always, we as teachers persevered through this disruption, and are happy to say classes of thirty five were less common at my school for that year.

However, this additional position was not renewed for this year, and I ended up with a class of thirty nine eighth graders this year. This class was also eventually reduced after a few months. But I still have a student load of 166 students. This makes it more difficult for me to give each student the depth of feedback they need on the many assignments I give that are meant to prepare them for High School. I tell these stories because I know many in the School Board Association may talk at great length about the unintended consequences of HB 3562, but I want to make clear to all of you the consequences of continuing to do nothing about large class sizes.

I am not sure how many of you on this committee followed the Portland teacher's strike last year. But I want to remind you that the issue that made the strike last another week was the district's unwillingness to commit to a classroom level committee to address large class sizes. HB 3562 provides a path forward so the district knows they will have to find a plan to give teacher's manageable amounts of students while they are bargaining. Please consider the consequences of large class sizes on our students, and pass this bill that will require districts to negotiate a plan to keep class sizes as low as possible, with its teachers.