

CLASS EXPLOSION

This year's increase in International Baccalaureate class sizes has damaging effects on education



story by AVNI BANSAL

EVERY DESK IN room 309 was taken.

My International Baccalaureate History of the Americas teacher was shocked. He looked at my 26-person class with wide eyes. There were twice as many students as last year.

Next, I entered my massive philosophy class of 27 students, then my English class of 28. Two more stunned teachers.

Increasing class sizes without additional support from the district could derail SM East's IB program and have detrimental effects on students' education.

When I was debating whether to take Advanced Placement classes or commit to the IB Diploma program, two main aspects of IB stood out to me: small class sizes and one-on-one time with teachers. That's why I chose to go for the diploma – a program where six out of seven of my classes are IB.

But I was blindsided.

While my one-year math and biology classes upheld their reputation for small, intimate classes of 12-14 students, one of the benefits advertised to me by upperclassmen, I was disheartened to see that the three, two-year classes I'd committed to were far from my expectations.

I've heard the phrase "every student learns differently" at least a billion times, but it stands true. I specifically chose IB because I get overwhelmed and distracted easily. When there are over 15-20 students in a

class, I end up staring off into space or start daydreaming about my after-school plans during a lecture. I can't focus when there's too much movement and so many voices talking at the same time.

And it's not just about me. Teachers need support too.

There's a 63% increase in the total number of juniors taking IB history this year versus last year, and a 32% increase in IB English. And, as Kristin Anderson says, the entire IB English curriculum is *writing, presenting, writing, presenting*. Which means this year, she must walk 18 additional students through their 1,500-word, seven-page Higher Level Essays.

Anderson has taught IB English to juniors for 14 years. And her biggest class size before this year? Twenty-two students. This unprecedented increase in class size makes me wonder how we're even going to finish the syllabus this year.

And Steve Klein, who started teaching IB History of the Americas just last year, has to figure out how to handle a class-size explosion on the spot. The rug is already being pulled out from under his feet.

The IB curriculum involves many – often weekly – presentations, which was a seemingly positive aspect. But now it takes three class periods to get through everyone's presentations, leaving a meager 15 minutes to discuss our

summer reading book. Not to mention, it's challenging to provide the same level of detailed feedback on 28 English presentations rather than last year's 13.

I'm already exhausted.

Teachers are having to adjust their lesson plans and cover the same amount of content in a smaller amount of time – mission impossible.

A 1980s study on student-to-teacher ratios led by the Tennessee Department of Education concluded that a 32% reduction in class size "increased student achievement by an amount equivalent to about three additional months of schooling," according to Brookings.

The study was talking about a seven-person difference – 15 versus 22. I'm talking about increasing 13 students to 28. Over double that amount.

No matter what my teachers' expertise is, this year's students won't be receiving the same quality of education as previous students.

Overworked teachers combined with distressed students is a dangerous combination. Overall class participation and student satisfaction – my satisfaction – are bound to decrease.

Then there's the domino effect.

These high-level courses last for two years. Next year's syllabus is a continuation of this year's classes. If the learning is insufficient now, my IB classmates and I will struggle more when

we eventually write our Extended Essays and build on two-year philosophy and history topics.

I'd rather spend my three-month summer break rewatching my favorite TV show, "Dexter," and volunteering with my friends at the University of Kansas Medical Center. But now I guess I'll be studying to prepare for next year's IB classes because my teachers won't have time to teach me.

Smaller classes encourage students, especially quieter ones, to get out of their comfort zone and participate more. But in a big class, they'd be lucky to even get a sentence in during a class discussion.

It's wonderful that students are challenging themselves by taking IB courses – they'll get exposure to reading translated books from numerous countries that aren't read in the AP classes, and analyze economic and cultural events across the Americas.

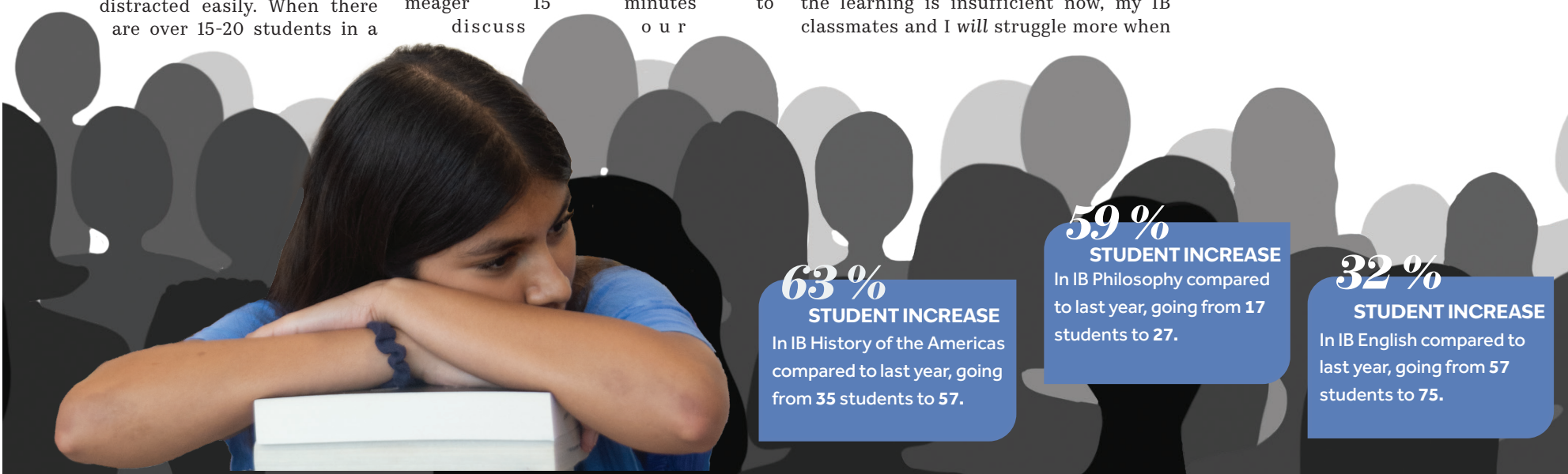
However, this increased enrollment – a positive development – shouldn't come at the cost of the quality of learning.

Something needs to be done.

East doesn't have the power to hire more teachers or put a cap on the number of students per IB class. The district does.

To encourage a positive classroom culture and maintain adequate instruction, the Shawnee Mission School District must do two things: acknowledge that the student-teacher ratio in IB classes is a serious problem and take action by employing additional IB teachers at East.

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63%
STUDENT INCREASE
In IB History of the Americas compared to last year, going from 35 students to 57.

59%
STUDENT INCREASE
In IB Philosophy compared to last year, going from 17 students to 27.

32%
STUDENT INCREASE
In IB English compared to last year, going from 57 students to 75.