

CLEVELAND HEIGHTS TEACHERS UNION
LOCAL 795 - AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION • EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

an Ohio Non-profit Corporation



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Cleveland Heights Teachers Union Response to CHUH Administration's Excessive Reduction-in-Staff – April 2016

Our district enrollment has been declining about 100 students per year, but what does this really look like?

Each year this means that there will be about 9 fewer students per grade level. This kind of change will not affect the number of classrooms we need as is being purported.

In fact, since 2007 the size of our teaching staff became significantly smaller. We have about 45 fewer classroom teachers this year than in 2007, which is close to a 10% reduction. The current cuts announced by administration will not only cut the 49 teaching slots and 2 counselor positions, but several other positions that will not be filled due to resignations and retirements. The result is that the administration is suggesting that our teaching staff should be cut by more than 22% over the same period when student enrollment has declined by 14%.

Our community has supported our current level of staffing for many years. No one wants class sizes to balloon out of control, but they will. Planning for 19 elementary classrooms throughout the district to start the year with 23 or more students (8 of these are at Boulevard) is unacceptable. Our students have many needs that cannot be met when the class sizes are so high. Sure, average class sizes will be low, but that is only when the calculations include self-contained special education classes that are mandated to keep low numbers. It does not help the vast majority of our students thrive to base staffing decisions on averages.

Which staff members are affected?

49 cuts that administration is considering on April 5 are teacher cuts. 2 more are counselors. The last is a security monitor. When considering how to value professionals and having a culture of excellence from Goal 4 of the strategic plan, this kind of action shows that this goal is not genuine. Hiring people one year only to throw them away the next is not valuing anyone, nor does it show any foresight to a long term goal. It is impossible to build and strengthen staff skills when we will be losing so many people we have tried to inculcate with a shared philosophy. For staff members not cut, but who will have to train the next set of new teachers who will be subsequently cut, there will be even less buy in.

Educational Programming:

The "doing more with less" philosophy has never worked in public schools. It is naïve to believe any different. Educational programming will suffer. Most teachers are already scrambling to do all of the work they are told must be done.

State Caseloads:

The state has its own idea of how many special education students can be served by an intervention specialist. The fact is that our teachers who work with special needs populations work long and hard to meet student needs, but the paperwork requirements are out of control. Part of this is the state and part is the lack of support provided by the district. To believe that we can cut 15.5 special education teachers out of 95 and keep the same level of services is magical thinking that will lead to problems. Such a drastic cut, whether the great state of Ohio believes it is possible or not, will hurt our students.

Average Class sizes:

Average class size should be as low as possible depending on the class, even though it is not uncommon to have class sizes around the district over 26. A statement saying we will have an average of 22 students is misleading, especially if special education and other restricted classes are taken into consideration. Average also means that there will be classes that have more than 22 – not that everything is going to be perfect. 24 or 26 students in a primary class is too many. Averages don't really tell the whole story.

Result:

In the past, the Board was upset when they approved deep cuts and then people laid off were called back to work. When the district is scrambling to get students into classes in August they will be forced to recall people back to work - if they are available. Creating a situation that will cause last minute decisions with little preparation at the beginning of a school year will not help our students. Disrupting teachers, parents, and most importantly our students through drastic changes in staffing levels will cause problems that we can only guess at right now.

How should a reduction be accomplished?

If we are truly overstaffed, which is debatable, administration should make a long range plan to cut over two or three years. This way we don't lose as many people whom we have hired, trained, and in whom we have invested. The reductions proposed this year cut us to the quick – there is no room for error. There is no way that all contingencies were taken into considerations. Very few practitioners were asked for their input. These cuts were decided by a disconnected central administration in isolation from the real facts about how our schools work. In early March the leadership of the Teachers Union was informed of the process used in the staff reduction. We pointed out a multitude of examples of problems they had not thought of, but administration did not try to look for other related problems. They were confident of their work and the rationale behind it.

Why so many mistakes?

There are innumerable details that appear to have been ignored as these excessive cuts were implemented. Here are a few that were not understood or investigated by administration when making decisions:

-2 or 3 teachers incorrectly got Reduction letters and had to be rescinded and other people got RIFd. In fact, when the Union leadership tried to reproduce the results of the RIF using the same information that administration had, there were at least 5 employees that should have been RIFd as directed by our contract and 5 that we should not have been RIFd. This may not seem significant unless you are one of the people who does not have a job. It seems like if the process was followed we should have gotten the same results.

-5th grade: At Oxford there are 53 students in 3 classes = average 18 versus Noble with 76 in 3 classes average 25 or 26. If there were 4 sections at Noble the average class size would be 19 which is still higher than Oxford. Shouldn't an extra section have been planned?

-108 total elementary general education sections: The planning includes 19 elementary classrooms with 23 or more students:
Boulevard has 8 grade level classes out of 12 general education classes at 23 or higher, Noble has 6, Oxford 2, and Rox EI 3.
Gearity, Canterbury, and Fairfax have no classes of 23 or higher.
Equity issues are part of our strategic plan, but don't seem to be taken into consideration.
On average the sizes might be just fine, but tell that to a student who is one of 26 versus one of 17.

-High School-Deaf culture – 45 requests and they were not even considered for running the course. 31 for ASL IV and administration is cutting it because they believe it has 13.

-High School Art-Jewelry 1 –Administration planned to combine 2 sections into one of 28 even though the fire marshal has limited the class size to 15 for safety reasons.

-Physical Education numbers don't add up. We have no idea how losing 3 more positions is going to make scheduling possible when we lost 2 or 3 high school positions just 2 years ago.

-Special Education – It is impossible to understand what is going on here. Losing 15.5 positions out of around 95 – more than 15%. We are unclear how we are going to deliver services in all the different ways we are required to even with administration's assurances. For instance, it is difficult to understand how or where co-taught classes are accounted for in administration's staffing details. It appears as though all students are lumped into one grouping for co-taught classes at the high school and division is used. Does this mean that classes that were self-contained don't exist? Did administration determine how many co-taught sections are being planned? – because we are certain it will also determine staffing levels. This is pretty serious since we have a special education population of around 19% of our total enrollment.

-There is a Pre-calculus class listed as reducing a math class, but it is not being taught by a math teacher – it is in the opportunity lab (electronic classroom). We told administration about this kind of mistake during one of our meetings and it does not appear they looked for other instances. In the example we gave them there were 7 sections of high school math being eliminated that had 1 or 2 students each. These students were also taking online classes and not being taught by members of the department. Their original numbers reduced a math teacher on this basis until we pointed it out. We expected them to reanalyze the example and rectify it. How many sections have been eliminated wrongly under this premise?

-High School Social Studies will be teaching two new college credit plus courses, African American History and American Studies, that are not accounted for in the administration's projections.

-Another disturbing issue arose in this current round of slashing. A few years ago we changed our contract language to clarify “hire date” so there would be no mistakes possible when making a reduction. We use the date on the letter of intent to hire from the administration as the official date when comparing teachers with similar license and seniority. This puts the entire control for creating different hire dates on the Human Resources Department as opposed to our unfortunate longstanding contract language that had teachers “draw lots” in order to determine who would keep a job and who would not. During the current reductions there were 3 art teachers who received letters of intent to hire from the district with the same exact date. The district had to come up with something “fair” to determine which two to lay off. These teachers were hired two years ago, after the language was changed. How is it possible that we are put in a position where there could be a challenge to something so basic under administration’s control?

Conclusion:

It is rare for our teachers union to organize and protest publicly concerning what is clearly administration’s right in determining the fate of the district. It is however, our obligation to speak out when we believe that choices administration is making will harm our children. We have tried to change the course of these current events, but could not keep silent as this set of reductions goes forward. In January, the forecast from Treasurer Gainer showed that current levels of staffing for next year would not put the district at a deficit – even though it would necessitate the passing of a levy for new money the next year. We are not suggesting that the administration not make any cuts. If there truly are places where we have too many teachers then this is reasonable if reductions cannot be accomplished through attrition.

We ask that the Board demand that administration go back to the drawing board and look at all the information with a new lens. They should talk to teachers who are in the classroom or visit schools and see the reality of what goes on across the district. Then make staffing decision based on this reality, perhaps over two or three years to ensure that we are not losing important assets.

Ari Klein, CHTU President