



## ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

*To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students*

*From the Office of the Head of School, Dr. Christopher A. Schoberl*

### **Is it Monday Yet? 1/24/25**



### **Less is More: Why Ashbrook School is Committed to Small Class Sizes**

When Eileen and I were newer parents, we were frequently approached by friends and family who were concerned about the money we were spending on private school educations for our then elementary school kids.

These conversations would usually start with, "I hope you don't mind some unsolicited advice, but why are you *wasting* all of your money on private school tuition for such young kids? Why not wait until they're in high school? Now THERE'S where you're gonna get bang for your education buck!!"

Of course this advice came from a good place, but it also spoke to a great amount of misinformation about developmentalism and brain science, and maybe even a bias that sometimes devalues the truly essential and tremendously important foundational work being done in early childhood, elementary, and middle grades classrooms. Beyond this, the vast majority of these well-meaning advice-givers did not know what Eileen and I knew: how devoted our kids' schools were to keeping class sizes as small as possible.

As longtime educators, Eileen and I had seen the impact of small class size on the work we were able to do in our own classrooms with other people's kids, and I am so glad we stayed the course. The time children spend in school, and particularly during that time of life when their brains are developing more than they will in any other period of their lives, from early

childhood through the middle grades, is one of the most critical determinants of their future success in school and beyond.

By the time students get to high school, work habits, school attitude, and approaches to learning, to say nothing of the neural pathways that have become increasingly less plastic through it all, are already very well established and, because of this, students are not as willing to engage in, or as responsive to, efforts to “remediate.”

The way Eileen and I saw it, based on our experience and our guts, making sure that we were doing all we could to build a strong foundation in the lower grades, seemed to make a lot more sense than banking those tuition dollars for high school. In the way of an analogy, saving money for a high school education reminded us of that town that built a hospital at the bottom of a dangerous cliff, rather than building a high fence at the top of the cliff, and guess what: research in the then emerging field of brain science eventually caught up with our gut instinct and validated this thinking. And what feels better than a little validation, especially when it affirms a decision that ran so counter to how many others were counseling us about the best interests of our children?

Maybe you have heard these well intentioned voices in your own circles; indeed, maybe you have even heard these voices *in your own head!* If this is the case, let me put your mind at ease: you have chosen wisely, and while I can write pages and pages about the many choices Ashbrook School has made in the interests of best practice, worthy of emulation by any school wanting to provide a cutting edge student experience, I will spend a few lines addressing one of the most important choices we have made: the choice to keep our class sizes small.

For the sake of context,

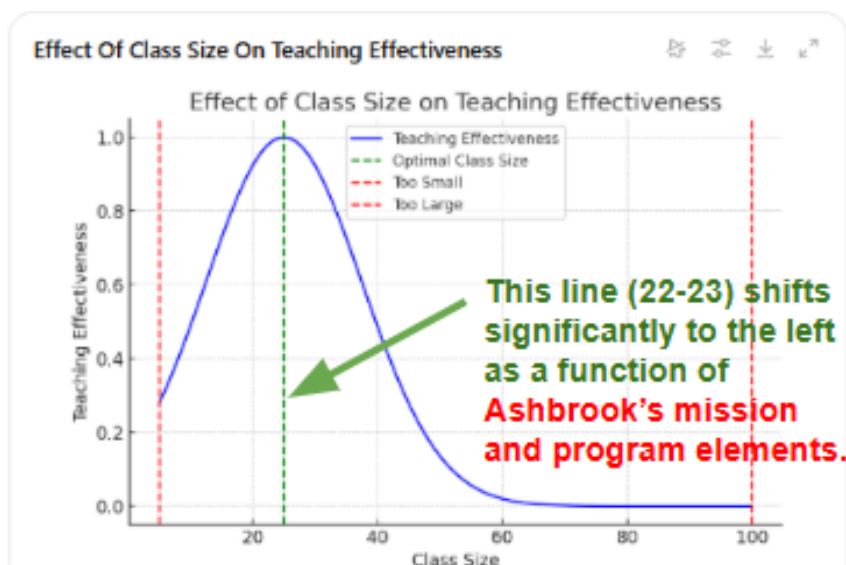
Local Schools Grade Level/Cap	Ashbrook School Grade Level/Cap
Preschool/20	PreSchool and Pre Kindergarten/16
Kindergarten/26	Kindergarten/18
1st-3rd Grades/28	1st-4th Grades/18
4th-8th Grades/32	5th-8th Grades/22

In fact, of all the program choices a school can make, maintaining small class size has consistently topped the charts as yielding significant benefits, particularly during early childhood through middle grades. These benefits extend across academic achievement,

social-emotional development, overall student experience, and teacher effectiveness, underscoring the importance of investing in reduced student-to-teacher ratios during these formative years.

### Enhanced Academic Achievement

Smaller class sizes have a direct and measurable impact on academic performance and the Explorer student experience. Studies, including the landmark Tennessee STAR (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio) project, a very robust study, reveal that students in smaller classes outperform their peers in larger classes on standardized tests. This effect is particularly pronounced in the early grades, where foundational skills in reading, writing, and math are established.



In smaller classes, teachers can devote more time to individualized instruction, tailoring lessons to meet each student's needs. For example, an Ashbrook student who needs a bit more time with phonics, is more likely to receive targeted support in a smaller classroom setting, ensuring they master this essential skill before progressing. In such a classroom, an Ashbrook teacher can make on the spot decisions, based on student need, to vary frequency, intensity, and duration of exposure in ways not possible in larger classrooms. Additionally, smaller class sizes allow for more frequent and meaningful assessments, enabling teachers to identify and address learning gaps promptly. Over time, this personalized approach fosters greater academic confidence and competence.

### Improved Social-Emotional Development

The social and emotional well-being of students is equally critical to their overall development. Smaller class sizes create an environment where students feel seen, heard, and valued. This sense of belonging is especially important as our young Explorers are

developing their self-concept, interpersonal skills, and what researchers call school attitude.

In classrooms with fewer students, teachers can foster closer relationships with each child and with each family, building trust and rapport as well as partnership. These relationships not only support academic learning but also help students navigate social challenges and develop emotional resilience. For example, a middle school student experiencing peer conflict is more likely to receive timely and effective guidance from an Ashbrook teacher who knows them well and has cultivated a supportive home/school partnership. Moreover, smaller class sizes encourage more peer-to-peer interaction, facilitating collaborative learning and the development of such essential 21st century skills as communication, flexibility, critical thinking, empathy, and teamwork.

### **Increased Teacher Effectiveness**

Teacher quality is one of the most significant in-school factors affecting student achievement. Smaller class sizes empower teachers to be more effective by reducing the logistical challenges of managing large groups of students. Moreover, and in keeping with Ashbrook's mission, with fewer students, teachers can focus on delivering high-quality instruction rather than spending disproportionate time on classroom management.

Furthermore, smaller class sizes enable teachers to employ a broader range of instructional strategies, including hands-on activities, critical thinking experiences, small group work, and one-on-one tutoring. These methods are often impractical in larger classes, where the sheer number of students limits flexibility. For instance, a science teacher in a small class can conduct more interactive experiments, ensuring each student actively participates and understands the concepts being taught. In this context, the level of autonomy enjoyed by Ashbrook's teachers, allowing them to make important, in the moment decisions about teaching methods, is a force multiplier enhancing even more the benefits of small class size.

Professional development also becomes more impactful in the context of smaller class sizes. Teachers can apply new techniques and approaches more effectively when they have the time and capacity to implement them fully. This continuous improvement in teaching practices benefits not only the current cohort of students but also future classes.

### **Long-Term Benefits**

The advantages of smaller class sizes extend beyond immediate academic and social outcomes. Research shows that students who experience smaller classes in their early years are more likely to successfully complete a course of study in higher education and achieve better economic outcomes in adulthood. These long-term benefits underscore the importance of prioritizing reduced class sizes during the formative years of education.

## **Challenges and Solutions**

While the educational benefits of smaller class sizes are clear, implementing this model presents significant economic challenges. When we reach out to you and ask for financial support beyond your tuition dollars, through the Explorers Fund Capital Campaign, for example, we do so knowing that this “ask” represents an additional strain on your household budget and a sacrifice beyond the tuition we are already grateful for. Beyond merely raising tuition or asking you for a donation, we are also working to take the weight off the shoulders of our parents. For example, the recent creation of the position of Director of Development, and the work Emily Bennet is doing in that role, is designed to generate support for the educational model we have committed to and that we know you value.

When we raise tuition or reach out annually through the Explorer Fund Capital Campaign, please know that this is in addition to a variety of ways we are endeavoring to defray the cost of this model. Emily’s work to build relationships with the community through soliciting corporate sponsorships, gifts from alumni, and writing grants (none of which we have done in the past), Mr. Holladay’s efforts to get the word out to the community about the availability of our prime rental spaces, and Miss Kelley’s efforts to create an enhanced and expanded summer camp experience, all contribute to the funding needed to keep our class sizes small. These efforts are in addition to the Board’s constant budgetary oversight and, in particular, ongoing search for efficiencies and cost reductions that will not impact our ability to deliver on our mission or on the promise of programs that provide an extraordinary student experience. Finally, though we are eager to remain small, we also have a bit of room to grow into. In this, word of mouth remains one of the most significant sources of prospective families kicking the tires (THANK YOU!), so please keep telling the Ashbrook story (and if you need an elevator speech, [try this](#)).

At Ashbrook School, reduced class sizes for young childhood through middle grades students is a proven strategy for enhancing educational outcomes and the best environment in which to challenge and nurture our young Explorers. Equally compelling are the social-emotional, and teacher-related benefits of smaller classes, all of which create a strong case for prioritizing this approach in educational policy and practice even beyond Ashbrook, leading to benefits that vastly offset the costs. Unfortunately, while Ashbrook School believes that the costs of this model are outweighed by the long-term advantages for students, teachers, and society as a whole, many schools are not willing or able to make this program decision. By remaining committed to smaller class sizes, and by asking you to invest in this model, Ashbrook remains your grateful partner in providing our children with the individualized attention and support they need to thrive in school and beyond.