

## The SABIS® View on Class Size

Parents of all backgrounds from around the world share a common desire to provide their children with a quality education that positions them well for success and fosters healthy personal and academic development. While the objective is similar the world over, the educational approach parents consider most effective varies vastly depending on geographic region, wealth, and personal experience, among other factors, particularly with regard to expectations relating to class size.

Extensive research has been conducted over decades around the world in an effort to quantify the impact of class size on academic performance and personal development. Regrettably, rather than offering clarity, the research has proven to be inconclusive at best. There are as many reports that support the claim that student performance increases in small classes as there are reports to the contrary. Further confusing the issue of class size is the global allure of child-centered or individualized instruction, perceived by parents as a natural benefit of small classes and associated with a guarantee of greater potential for personal growth.

While the debate about class size has raged on without resolution, SABIS® has taken a different approach to understanding class size and its effect on academic progress and personal development. Its view has been shaped by experience in school operations acquired over 126 years. Drawing on its long-term, global experience, SABIS® has developed an approach to class size that delivers everything that parents are looking for and more.

In forming its view on class size, SABIS® set out to understand the allure of small classes. Parents are attracted to small classes for the general reasons already referred to – mainly, the expectation that in an environment limited to a small number of students, their children will receive individualized attention and instruction from the teacher, who will have an easier task of managing behavior, thus leading to better knowledge acquisition and more well-rounded personal development. But can a small class size really deliver on these expectations?

Let us consider an example demonstrating some of the constraints of individualized instruction. Take, for example, a class of 15 students with a class period of 45 minutes in length. In order for each of the 15 students to have individual attention, each one would have three minutes of the teacher's time; not much time in which to learn something. Taking a different approach, let's say that in the 45-minute lesson, 10 students each have one question. Each student takes one minute to pose the question and the teacher takes two minutes to answer each one. This leaves only 15 minutes for instruction, again not a sufficient amount of time to cover any meaningful amount of material. In such an environment, learning efficiency within a defined time frame is not attainable unless a school expects learning to take place outside of class. Individualized instruction is not conducive to the timely mastery of material given time constraints and the sheer volume of academic material to be learned, no matter how small the class.

Just as parents' expectations of benefits of individualized instruction are constrained by reality, so too is the belief that a teacher has an easier time managing behavior in a small class versus a large one. Managing the behavior of any group of students, large or small, is a challenge that requires a teacher to use the right approach. A teacher who does not have the right tools or who does not implement an

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effective approach will have as many difficulties managing in both scenarios – a small class of 15 or a large class of 30.

Drawing on its long experience in education and an understanding of what parents want for their children's education, SABIS® set out to develop a system that could meet the expectations – targeted instruction in an efficient learning environment with high student engagement, rich interaction, and personal attention – a system that could nurture the skills needed to work well with individuals as well as groups throughout life. The result is the SABIS® Educational System, a system that delivers exceptional outcomes on all levels even as it sets out to change parents' paradigm about class size.

### **The New Paradigm**

Before talking about class size, SABIS® starts by asking the basic question: "What exactly constitutes a 'class'?" Consider this example. There are four students enrolled in an English class. One has studied English for a couple of years; one is a native speaker of English; a third has just started learning the language; and the fourth has never set foot in a classroom where English is spoken. Can these four students be considered a class? Four is certainly a small number of students. Yet, if they were put together in an English class, the teacher would only be able to meet the needs of one student at a time, with the three remaining students falling behind, misbehaving, or wasting time. Therefore, SABIS® would argue that these four students do not constitute a class. A "class" as defined by SABIS® is any group of individuals that shares the same prerequisite knowledge in a subject and that, therefore, possesses the necessary background knowledge to be able to learn and progress. Having taken the time to define a class, SABIS® has developed the tools necessary to form classes based on students' knowledge.

SABIS® member schools around the world implement an admissions process that is non-selective (i.e. students are not accepted based on the attainment of high performance levels on placement tests). Students are placed in grade levels based on Diagnostic Test (DT) results that identify each student's mastery of concepts in the subjects of English and mathematics, subjects which SABIS® considers to be "gateway subjects" opening the door to the study of other disciplines. SABIS® DTs cover a breadth of material that helps the school identify the concepts that a student has mastered as well as those not yet mastered. Based on DT results and evidence of mastery of the necessary prerequisite knowledge, a student is placed in a "class" with others who have demonstrated the same level of mastery.

Having properly placed students in clearly defined classes, SABIS® member schools are ready to begin the learning process, a complex undertaking with several important components. These components include a set curriculum, textbooks, an efficient instructional model, ongoing monitoring of student progress, and thorough follow up, all of which reinforce the SABIS® classroom experience.

### **The SABIS® Classroom Experience**

Students in SABIS® member schools benefit from a system that views a successful learning environment as one in which students can learn the most in the least amount of time. Time is seen as a limited

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resource and one that must be maximized. In delivering instruction to students **at all grade levels** from first grade through high school, teachers in SABIS® schools implement the SABIS Point System® of instruction, which is based on the precise identification of measurable learning objectives, called “points,” for every lesson and actively engages students in a *community of learners*.

In the SABIS Point System®, teachers present one point at a time and then ask the class to demonstrate their understanding of the concept through the completion of a written exercise. Next, moving from teacher-led instruction, the class engages as a *community of learners*, checking each other’s work in small, manageable groups. One student in each group is selected to coordinate the group based on academic competence in the subject. This student oversees his/her own micro-community of learners, managing questions and offering further explanations (or looking to other group members to do so), when needed. The group leader also works in close coordination with the teacher, asking for support and keeping students on task until everyone in the group has shown mastery. Once the entire class has demonstrated mastery of the point, teacher-led instruction resumes and the learning cycle continues.

The purposeful composition of a “class,” the implementation of the SABIS Point System®, and the carefully-designed components of SABIS® Educational System enable SABIS® member schools to deliver a high-quality education. Expectations are exceeded as students engage in efficient learning, participate as active, responsible members in a community of learners, and experience ample opportunities for self-development. Instruction is targeted and measurable; students learn sequentially, building a solid academic foundation. The learning environment is efficient, drawing not only on the teacher as an educator, but also on the rich potential present in a large pool of students. This pool contributes to the rich environment of learning and thus raises standards. Personal attention and interaction is frequent; in every lesson students have the opportunity to develop and practice essential life skills such as diplomacy, leadership, and teamwork. Finally, through high levels of student engagement in the learning process, classroom distractions are minimized. This approach, coupled with active monitoring of student learning and follow up, enables students in SABIS® member schools to learn more in less time and to do so most effectively in large classes<sup>1</sup>.

Even though there is a universal tendency to believe that smaller classes produce better results, SABIS® has shown otherwise through the implementation of its comprehensive educational system. This system effectively delivers targeted instruction to large classes of students who learn in an efficient environment characterized by high engagement, rich interaction, and personal attention. Supported by a comprehensive system, carefully formed classes, and proven teaching methods, SABIS® students participate as members in a *community of learners* as they acquire a strong foundation of knowledge and the skills in preparation to compete successfully in a changing world.

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<sup>1</sup> Classes in SABIS® member schools can vary in size. In different countries depending on legislation and available physical space, class size can go up to 36 at the high school level.