



Policymakers Invest Heavily in Class-Size Reduction

*Now the Question Is:
Can Schools Obtain the Benefit from
Smaller Classes?*

In recent years, policymakers in nearly half the states and the federal government have launched initiatives to reduce class size. These widespread efforts offer perhaps the clearest example ever in the history of U.S. public education of research evidence guiding a particular reform policy.

That evidence, accumulated over the past couple of decades by studies in Tennessee and elsewhere, suggests that students in small classes (13-17 students per teacher), especially in the early grades, outperform students in regular-sized classrooms, which nationally average about 25 students. The effect of small classes is especially positive for low-achieving students living in poverty.

In addition to being grounded in research, the movement to reduce class size enjoys the enthusiastic backing of teachers and parents who are attracted by the social benefits of smaller classes: easier classroom management, better-behaved students, more personal attention.

Not everyone in the research and policy communities agrees that the evidence supports the effort to reduce class size, but for all practical purposes the debate has now shifted from whether class-size reduction makes a difference to how and under what circumstances.

How can school districts capitalize on the benefits of smaller classes? This question is the focal point for a *Policy Report* on class size published spring 2000 by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educa-

(continued on page 2)

**Class Size
POLICY REPORT**
Reporting on Policy Issues
in K-12 Educational
Management

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operates under contract with the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of OERI, and no official endorsement by OERI should be inferred. As one of several units in the Educational Resources Information Center network, the Clearinghouse's subject area is school policy, management, and leadership at the elementary and secondary levels.

tional Management. The 20-page report, the first in an annual series focusing on key policy issues in K-12 educational management, seeks to help policymakers:

- Understand the benefits of class-size reduction (CSR).
- Assess realistically its costs.
- Consider research-based alternatives, if there is still doubt about where to invest education dollars.
- Make sure, when CSR is undertaken, that its benefits are realized in the classroom.

Topics range from the conditions under which small class size facilitates student achievement to teaching practices in small classes, the costs of reducing class size, alternatives to CSR, professional development, and considerations in designing a CSR policy.

Conditions for success of CSR.

Although not attempting to be a review of research, the report points to evidence that smaller classes are most likely to benefit students when:

- The student-teacher ratio is reduced significantly—to fewer than 17 students per teacher.
- CSR is implemented in grades K-3.
- Well-trained teachers employ effective teaching practices in suitable facilities with access to needed materials and services.

Teaching practices in small classes. Research has consistently found that teachers do not significantly change their teaching practices when they move to smaller classes. In implementing CSR, therefore, one of the chief concerns is whether teachers must change their teaching practices for the reduction in class size to benefit student achievement. The research to date offers little guidance on this issue.

The report lists several instructional techniques recommended by Charles M. Achilles, a leading researcher in the Tennessee studies.

The costs of CSR. Class-size reduction is without a doubt the single

most expensive education reform ever attempted. The federal government's Class Size Reduction Program has the long-range goal of helping school districts hire 100,000 new teachers and reduce class sizes in the elementary grades to a nationwide average of 18 students. Now in its second year, with funding at \$1.3 billion in the current fiscal year, the program is projected to cost \$12 billion by 2005.

These federal expenditures on CSR are exceeded by allocations at the state level. The cost of California's CSR initiative is now over \$1.4 billion per year. Several other states are allocating sums ranging from a few million to hundreds of million dollars each year to the cause.

The report notes that "although some aspects of the financial impact of CSR can be readily calculated, an avalanche of other unanticipated financial and nonfinancial costs may devastate CSR efforts." A recent study, summarized in the report, estimated that California's teacher-quality crisis, largely a result of districts having to hire underqualified teachers to meet the requirements of CSR, will cost between \$1.3 and \$1.8 billion to remedy.

Another California study documented CSR's strain on facilities, displacement of other programs, and other hidden costs.

To guide policymakers, the report lists several questions to ask when trying to calculate CSR's actual costs.

Alternatives to CSR. Contributing author Lawrence O. Picus, professor and director of the Center for Research in Education Finance at the University of Southern California, acknowledges "that reducing class size can, and probably does, lead to improve student performance. It is, however, a very expensive option." He advises policymakers to consider other, perhaps more cost-effective, alternatives.

One range of options, Picus suggests, deals with teacher knowledge

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and skills. He points to research demonstrating that expenditures on improved teacher education, teacher experience, and teacher salaries "appear to have a greater impact on student test scores than does lowering the pupil-teacher ratio."

Picus also points to reforms that restructure how educational resources are used. For example, Odden and Busch (1998) found that reform designs supported by the New American Schools program led to substantial gains in student performance with relatively little additional expenditure.

Professional development. "It is ironic that smaller class size has become a policy goal at a time when teachers, at least in some states and in some subject areas, are in short supply," the report states. To meet class-size targets mandated by some state

initiatives, school districts have had to hire marginally well-trained teachers, thus placing a premium on the need for professional development.

Designing a policy. The report's concluding article is a set of guidelines, expressed in the form of questions board members and district offi-

cial can ask themselves as they design a policy for class-size reduction. The guidelines, which address funding, facilities, teaching, and other issues, can also stimulate discussion among legislators who are designing state-level policy on class-size reduction, the report notes.

Other features of the report are a table displaying information about state initiatives to reduce class size; sidebars presenting conflicting views on CSR held by researchers, educators, and policymakers; preliminary data on results of the federal initiative; and benefits of small classes for teachers and students.

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We have all returned to a familiar restaurant only to find the interior redecorated and the menu changed. After the initial surprise, we welcome the changes, for they enhance our dining experience.

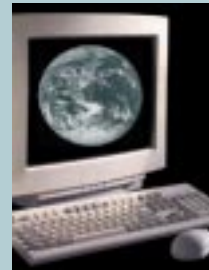
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As part of this site makeover, the "home page" has been completely restructured. Much like the menu at a restaurant, this jumping-off point now gives you a comprehensive overview of the contents of the site. It also provides you with a more direct route to sections within the site. More detailed navigation bars guide you to items of interest. Material recently posted on the site, such as newly released publications, is featured prominently on this top-level

page so you can see what has changed since you last visited the site.

Speaking of menus, we've added a host of new "entrees." One section of the site that boasts fresh offerings is "Trends and Issues," which provides syntheses of information on fifteen key topics within our scope. Most topics covered—ranging from violence prevention to school reform—include a discussion, references, resources, and links to other sites. Some of the topic areas now include a search of the ERIC database (less useful abstracts have already been culled). And a few of the topics also contain special supplemental sections. For example, the area on school safety includes the text of an expert's testimony before the Oregon legislature and information about a proposed school-safety bill.

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