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Five Facts to Know About Class Size Research

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Newsletter

Five Facts to Know About Class Size Research



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It has been a factor in recent teacher strikes sweeping the nation, including in **Oakland, Chicago,** and **Los Angeles**. Uniformly popular among **teachers** and **parents** alike, class size reduction initiatives are the perpetual people pleaser of the political world, repeatedly appearing in forums such as **State of the Union speeches** and **campaign platforms**. But what does research tell us about the connection between smaller class sizes and key outcomes such as student achievement or high school graduation?

In recent years, skeptics ranging from the popular author Malcolm Gladwell and Hoover Institution scholar **Eric Hanushek** have cited

research to cast doubt on the efficacy and value of class size reduction reforms, launching a cottage industry of news articles boasting such headlines as *Small Classes: Popular, But Still Unproven* and *Despite Popularity with Parents and Teachers, Review of Research Finds Small Benefits to Small Classes*.

Of course, the implementation of any common reform will show varying outcomes in different instances. Responsible scholars and policymakers, therefore, insist on looking at the entire body of research. In one of the National Education Policy Center's most often-cited policy briefs, *Does Class Size Matter?*, **Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach**, a professor at Northwestern University, reviews the research comprehensively and reaches a clear set of conclusions. The five facts below are based on the analysis she presents in her brief.

1. **Smaller classes in early grades are associated with better test scores:** The largest and most rigorous class size study ever conducted (Tennessee's Student Teacher Achievement Ratio, or STAR, experiment) found, in no uncertain terms, that students in smaller classes of 13 to 17 students in grades K-3 outperformed their peers in larger classes of 22 to 25 students: STAR found that all students benefited, on average, from the 13- to 17-student classes. However, African American students and students from low-income families benefited even more. Most quasi-experimental studies reach similar conclusions. It's worth noting that the vast majority of high-quality class size research focuses—as the STAR study did—on the early grades, so more research is needed in this area. An exception is a study that found that smaller eighth-grade class sizes are associated with higher rates of student achievement and engagement, especially in urban schools.
2. **Smaller classes in early grades are associated with better long-term outcomes:** These outcomes include lower rates of juvenile crime, higher rates of high school and college completion, and increased odds of saving money, marrying, and owning a home.
3. **Class size reduction helps, even if classes remain large:** Some researchers have concluded that class size reduction only helps if class size drops below a magic number like 15. However, the preponderance of evidence suggests that reductions can improve student achievement even when class size remains as high as 40.
4. **Class size reductions make an even bigger difference for experienced teachers:** Although all teachers benefit, on average, from class size reductions, experienced teachers are better able to take advantage of the smaller class sizes. With smaller classes, teachers can spend more time on instruction and less time on classroom management. They can more closely monitor student learning. They have more time to use alternative approaches to re-teach concepts to students who do not get them the first time. And they have higher-quality personal interactions with their students.

5. **Class sizes, student-teacher ratios have risen in recent years:** After falling steadily for 40 years, student-teacher ratios spiked upwards around the time of the Great Recession (2008-2010), according to the most recent federal data available when Schanzenbach's brief was published. **More recent data** suggests that the ratios remained flat or continued to rise through 2015 (when they were 16:1), but are projected to start declining once more this year. It's important to note that pupil-teacher ratios are not the same as class size because some teachers do not have their own full-time classes (e.g., elementary school music teachers) or, as in the case of special education teachers, are placed in very small classes for students with disabilities. However, it is easier to calculate student-teacher ratios and this data is available, on a consistent basis, over longer periods of history. Average class size for primary school students in self-contained classes was **21.6 in 2011-12**, according to the most recent available federal data. That's up from 20.3 in 2007-08.

NEPC Resources on Class Size ->

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