



VIEWPOINT

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Class Size: Where Belief Trumps Reality

By: David W. Kirkpatrick

Summary

David Kirkpatrick exposes some misconceptions surrounding the idea that classroom size reduction is a cost-effective reform of the education system. He shows that history, research, and recent experience clearly indicate that size reduction is not all its proponents contend it is cracked up to be.

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The size of classrooms can make a difference in the education of children. But perhaps no belief is so expensive or contrary to the facts than that which maintains smaller classes, as determined by some arbitrary number, is a cost effective way to benefit students.

It is to be expected educators will harbor this view because, whatever the impact on students, a teacher with fifteen students per class has less responsibility than one with thirty. But members of the general public, especially parents of school students, stubbornly maintain this view, contrary to history, research findings, and experience.

Class size has been regularly reduced over the years, and is currently smaller than ever. Early in the nineteenth century, under the Lancasterian system, a teacher might be responsible for a class of 1000 or more. They handled it by using students as assistants. In New York City schools at the time of the Civil War, relatively untrained young women teachers had classes with as many as 150 students. Even the superintendent agreed that was unreasonable for a teacher to have more than 100 students per class.



Reducing classroom sizes simply doesn't have all the positive effects proponents contend it has.

When this writer began teaching in a public high school more than 45 years ago, the school had an 8-period teaching day. Teachers typically had six classes, one period of non-teaching duty, and one free period daily. During the six teaching periods, classes commonly had 30-35 students each, giving the teacher a daily student load of 175-200+ students. By contrast, today's classes are typically about 25 students and often mandated to be fewer, yet class size remains a complaint.

If smaller classes are a guarantee of better education, why hasn't it happened? Does anyone maintain that public education in New York City today, with many classes of 25 students, and none with 150, is five or six times more effective than was true with the 150 or so in the 1860s?

Indeed, the research confirms this anecdotal observation. A decade ago, Eric Hanushek at the University of Rochester

reviewed more than 300 studies of class size. Almost without exception they concluded it made no difference. The few positive findings were so minor as to be insignificant. And they were counterbalanced by a few that found negative results—that is, as class size went down so did student achievement. Of course many in the education establishment quote the few studies with any good news for them, while failing to note that they are the exceptions and the gains are almost nonexistent.

Recent experience also indicates the lack of cost-effective educational gains obtained from reducing class size. Then there is the classic current experience in California which ten years ago by a statewide law mandated maximum class size in grades 1-3 (later adding 4th grade) of 20. This cost an additional \$1.5 billion the first year. Ten years later more than \$15 billion additional has been spent chasing this moonbeam, with miserable results. Even ignoring such frauds as reported in the March 31, 2007 *Los Angeles Times* of a district that "created phantom classes to pull the wool over state officials' eyes," the paper concluded that "There is still no evidence that the multibillion-dollar investment in small primary classes has made more than an incremental difference."

Talk about waste! After ten years you would think citizens, particularly irate taxpayers, would be demanding that it's time to give it up, but the program is still popular.

Suggestions for reducing class size are not based on sound history, research, or experience. If we insist upon ignoring what research suggests is the way to go, at least we should not do what research suggests doesn't work and, most of all, stop doing those things that clearly do not work.

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(David W. Kirkpatrick is a Senior Education Fellow with the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a research and educational institute located in Columbus, Ohio. More information is available at www.buckeyeinstitute.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.

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Please contact:

Joe Staudt
88 East Broad Street, Suite 1120
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Phone: (614) 224-4422
Fax: (614) 224-4644

www.buckeyeinstitute.org
jstaudt@buckeyeinstitute.org

