
Reducing Class Size to Enhance Learning

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In 1998, acting on President Clinton's call for action, Congress began the seven year Class Size Reduction program. The program's goal is to increase academic performance by limiting the number of students in a classroom to no more than 18.

The program provided \$1.2 billion during the fiscal year 1999 and \$1.3 billion in 2000. These federal dollars enabled school districts to hire an estimated 29,000 new teachers for the 1999-2000 school year and provide professional development. In 90,000 classrooms, the average class size in grades 1-3 has gone from 23 to 18, and 1.7 million young children are learning in a smaller, more personalized classroom. Class Size Reduction funds have enabled some states to initiate reform and others to help fund current programs.

In Wisconsin, SAGE (Student Achievement Guarantee in Education) was initiated in 1996 in an effort to increase the academic achievement of economically disadvantaged students. This program reduced the classroom ratio to 15:1 in grades K-3.

Test scores of SAGE students between 1996-97 and 1998-99 show that reducing classroom size leads to higher academic performance. The scores of 9,876 students in grades 1-3 in 30 public schools in the SAGE program were compared to those of students in 16 non-participating schools. On the Terra Nova edition of the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills, SAGE students scored an average of 10 points higher than those in the comparison groups. The study also concluded that in most cases, African-American students showed even more improvement than white students. Evidence of the program's success prompted the governor and state legislature to increase funding, allowing more schools to participate.

Increased scores are only one of the benefits of such programs. SAGE teachers noted fewer discipline problems, making the school safer. Stronger, more solid relationships exist between teachers and students, creating a more positive environment. Potential problems can be addressed more quickly. Students who are having problems are more easily identified, and teachers are better able to offer or find help.

Fewer discipline issues means more continuous instructional time, with fewer interruptions. Students stay on task and are actively involved in learning for longer periods of time, enabling them to delve deeper into a subject and more fully cover the curriculum. This increases the likelihood of reaching grade-level objectives. Because of the increased learning opportunities, many students exceed grade-level requirements by the end of the year and gain more confidence in their ability to learn. A more solid foundation in educational basics results in higher achievement levels, increasing the chance of academic success.

Smaller class size allows for more individualization. Students have more opportunities to share their thoughts and work and receive more feedback from the teacher and peers. As students display their knowledge, teachers can target strengths and weaknesses and determine where assistance is needed. With more opportunities to practice, ask questions, and receive feedback, students gain a better and deeper understanding of the lesson.

Reducing classroom size also improves teacher morale and increases job satisfaction. Less time is spent on discipline and classroom management, enabling teachers to focus more on lessons, engage in hands-on educational activities, and help students in the learning process. More flexibility in instructional strategies allows them to incorporate new techniques, projects, and activities that a larger classroom would prohibit.

The Tennessee Project STAR (Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio) data shows that students who spent more years in small classes experienced greater gains in achievement than those who participated fewer years. Data shows that the benefits of participating in smaller classes continued long after students returned to an average-size class.

Critics of this reform movement cite increased expense and hiring underqualified teachers as shortcomings. They also note that reducing the number of students in a classroom does not automatically produce these results. Professional development that helps teachers incorporate more hands-on and critical thinking activities is essential.

Sources

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