

Class Size Reduction for the State of Florida: Is This the Solution for a Better Education?

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Abstract: Smaller class sizes have a positive impact on student achievement but Florida struggles with the problem of how to achieve smaller classes. Through a review of the literature, this paper discusses some of the programs currently used across the US, with the focus on Florida. Conclusions and implications are presented.

Class size reduction has been an issue of research and discussion since the early 1980's in American education. Researchers have conducted numerous quantitative experiments via standardized testing and qualitative studies using meta-analysis. Studies have been conducted focusing on the relationship between student achievement and class size and the impact it has on educational practices (Pritchard, 1999). The overall trend in the findings is that smaller classes would be beneficial to both students and teachers in primary grades.

The State of Florida Senate introduced Senate Bill 30-A, which addresses Class Size Reduction (CSR) and its implementation. The Bill mandates the reform to begin in the 2003-2004 school year, reducing each classroom by at least two students per year at the district level (Horne, 2003). According to a memorandum by education commissioner Jim Horne (2003), the amendment to the state constitution in Section 1, Article IX mandates final goals for the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year. The maximum number of students in core curricula courses assigned to a teacher in each of the following three grade levels is as follows: (a) Pre-K through grade 3, 18 students; (b) grades 4 through 8, 22 students; and (c) grades 9 through 12, 25 students.

The political perspective is that the state will provide funds to all districts for achieving the proposed goals of classroom reduction for the 2010-11 school year. Districts achieving their goals within the five years will be able to use the funds provided to them by the state for purposes other than classroom reduction; i.e. increasing teacher salaries, operations and capital outlay, etc.

The purpose of this research study is multifold: (a) to address issues of class size reduction in various states across the US and its effects on improving education, and (b) to investigate how these same issues are drawing concern in the State of Florida under the A+ Plan and No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Method

Data were collected by reviewing memoranda and class size reduction summaries from the Florida Department of Education, executive summaries from the California's Class Size Reduction (CSR) Research Consortium, on line press releases/newspaper articles from Research Institutions on line Archives and pertinent Websites. Once these data were collected, they were placed in categories for analysis. We conducted the interrelated reliability analysis by reading and re-reading the data, and crosschecking to keep track of common themes and patterns that emerged. The following themes emerged as a result of the literature search: (a) increase in student achievement, (b) increase in instructional time and decreased discipline issues, and (c)

decrease in teaching credentials and qualifications. Each theme will be discussed in this section of the paper.

Literature Review

Increase in Student Achievement

Smith and Glass (1978) reported the results of 77 empirical studies, finding first in a meta-analysis and secondly in a later analysis that a class size of fewer than twenty promoted students' reactions, teacher morale, and the quality of the instructional environment. Since then, more recently conducted experimental studies have revealed the importance of lowering class sizes in the primary grades. Four states that are credited for their outstanding contributions in the importance of class size reduction in the primary grades are Indiana, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.

The state of Indiana in 1984 compared the mean scores in reading and mathematics for students in the first, second and third grades who were in classes of nineteen to twenty students. The studies revealed that students in the smaller classes improved their reading scores significantly with very little gains in mathematics (Pritchard, 1999). Using the Indiana model, Pate-Bain (1985) prompted Tennessee to "reduce student/teacher ratios and adopt the name STAR, an acronym for Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio" (HEROS, 2003).

The STAR longitudinal study has been one of the most respected experimental research studies done in modern times. It is well known for its effects lowering class size results, because it "possessed the essential features of a controlled research experiment designed to produce reliable evidence about the effects of reducing class size" (Pritchard, 1999). Some of the findings included: (a) kindergarten showed definite advantage for small classes in achievement but no significant advantage for the use of a teacher aide, (b) first grade small classes outperformed students in regular classes on standardized tests, (c) second grade small classes had significant advantages in the SAT Reading, Math, Listening, and Word Skills, and (d) third grade small classes repeated the pattern; the results were the same for all students in different locations (urban, rural, inner city, and suburban).

Increase Instruction Time, and Decrease Discipline Issues

Burke County in the state of North Carolina began a study in 1990, which was phased in as a class size reduction initiative in the 1995-96 school year. Using students in first, second, and third grade, the study found that small classes increased instructional time and decreased time dedicated to discipline issues (Egelson, Harman & Achilles, 1996). Wisconsin began the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) Program involving kindergarten, first, second, and third grade students from low-income families and found that discipline issues were much less and instruction time had increased significantly (CSR Research Consortium, 2000).

Decrease in Teaching Credentials and Qualifications

The State of California began its class size reduction program in 1996-97. The program's goal was to reduce the student-teacher ratio throughout the state, for kindergarten through third grade to 20 to 1 (Kirk & Ward, 2000). One great concern was that California's fourth graders had ranked 38th among 40 participating states in reading; therefore, along with the class size reduction, a reading initiative program was started (Bullwinkle & Cook, 1999). In order to guarantee the program's success, the state invested an initial \$1 billion dollars, followed by \$1.5 billion each additional year. Due to the pace at which class sizes were being reduced, the state had to hire over 23,000 teachers within the first two years, which in turn produced a new set of problems that were not foreseen. Unlike Tennessee, California had many different variables that

would affect the program, such as a larger population, overcrowding issues, a diversity of both racial and ethnic backgrounds, and an inadequate amount of physical space and teachers.

There was a decline in level of teacher preparation and experience; inequities worsened especially among poor, minority and ELL (English Language Learners) students, and an increase was obtained on the SAT-9 among students in smaller classes (Bullwinkle & Cook, 1999). Along with the California Department of Education, scientists from various educational research institutions, including American Institute for Research (AIR), RAND, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), WestEd, and EdSource have analyzed the Class Size Reduction Program and suggested that California needs to take care of the following issues before they continue to promote class size reductions among other grades: (a) the number of teachers with less than full credentials needs to decrease, especially since the largest number of these teachers is found in schools with poor, minority and ELL students, and (b) the program also needs to give more flexibility to districts, allowing the districts to make decisions that benefit their schools more productively (Bullwinkle & Gaylor, 2002).

In order to comply with the class size mandates within the allotted time, many districts have had to dip into their own school budgets and have been forced to cut back on programs such as music and art. Another issue is that California still has overcrowding in many of their schools due to the lack of space and funding available for classroom expansions.

Conditions Specific to the State of Florida

Florida, like California, has issues of overcrowding in their schools, specifically in Miami-Dade County, where about 41 percent of the county's schools are at 150 percent over capacity (Weaver-Dunne, 2000). Many schools have had to convert closets and teachers' lounges into classrooms. Other schools have become mini portable cities where conditions are sometimes unacceptable. The schools' population is greatly growing on a yearly basis, due to immigrant students who make up about 22 percent of the system's 360,000 students (Weaver-Dunne, 2000). Miami-Dade County cannot build schools fast enough, nor does it have the funds to do so. It was estimated that the county would need over \$1.3 billion dollars to meet its challenges.

Governor Bush in the Florida's Educational Budget proposed that 2.8 billion dollars be dedicated in addition to the funds already allocated for the state's school construction and renovation programs. This proposal supports his "Classrooms for Kids Program" (Florida's e Budget, 2003), which would help create smaller class sizes. The Governor has also proposed \$143.2 million dollars of the state's fund be allocated to recruit, retain, and provide professional development for teachers. This proposal is due to the anticipated need of nearly 192,000 new teachers (Florida's e Budget, 2003). Unlike California, the State of Florida has had a reading program since the year 2001, the *Just Read, Florida*. The program's goals are to ensure that every child can read at or above grade level by the year 2012. Along with this program, the State of Florida has had the A+ Plan for education, which the state claims "has resulted in greater student achievement, school accountability, and parental choice in deciding what education forum is best for their child" (Florida's e-Budget, 2003).

Under the A+ plan and No Child Left Behind programs, parents who have students in failing schools can take advantage of a voucher system, which helps class size reduction while providing students with a choice in their education. Students are able to relocate to another public school or attend a private school of their choice. The private schools, however, do not abide by the accountability standards that are set forth for the public school sector, nor are all private schools open to voucher students (Neas & Keenan, 2003). Like the voucher system, the

state of Florida has promoted a series of tools and options for each district to use as they try to meet the requirements of the class size reduction, Senate Bill 30A. Some of the options include introducing year round school, redrawing school attendance zones, and rescheduling classes such as double sessions. Other options are using joint facilities along with colleges and universities to promote dual enrollment courses.

Schools may choose to allow students to graduate from high school as soon as they pass the tenth grade Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), or schools may reduce the necessary credits for graduation from the current twenty-four. These options may assist in the downsizing of classrooms, but it creates restrictions as to which colleges students may attend. Colleges mandate that students have a well-rounded education. In essence, the state has been given an a-la-carte flexibility plan.

Conclusions and Implications for Florida Policymakers

In conclusion, small class sizes are beneficial to students, especially in the area of reading. Teachers benefit from a small classroom environment too. Teachers also benefit from having a lesser load of papers to grade, which in turn allows more time for lesson plan preparations. Many states have proven the effectiveness of class size reduction, but our state is only at the starting line. Florida has been working very hard for reform, but like California, it has many challenging issues, beginning with Florida's unique and growing multicultural population. Will our poor and minority students truly benefit from these plans, or will these minority students be somehow jeopardized?

As our state makes greater demands towards student achievement and school accountability, will our schools use funds that would enrich an entire school population to benefit only a few? In other words, will it be more important to have 22 students in an eighth grade class, and not have any funds for an enriching art class? Will we truly have all the teachers that we need, or will our state mimic California's existing situation? How will funding occur? As is, Miami-Dade County Public Schools is suffering due to misappropriations of funds. Teachers have not been given an appropriate raise in over three years throughout our state. The FCAT seems to dominate the situation by dictating which school is worthy of bonus and/or praise. It seems as though many teachers leave the profession within the first five years and students with special needs seem to suffer the most no matter what alternative is chosen. Maybe policymakers and educational administrators should promote a friendly environment that will attract corporations to the state of Florida. Promoting a symbiotic partnership between corporations and the school system is certainly something to consider where each depends on the other to produce a highly educated population. This could translate into a highly educated work force.

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