



## Class Size

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[ECS Issue Site--www.ecs.org](http://www.ecs.org)

### Overview

Parents, educators and the public consistently have ranked lower class size high on their list of desired education reforms. The question is: Do smaller classes make a positive difference in achievement, especially for poor children?

### Quick Facts

This issue page serves as a portal to a variety of information on class-size reduction, including summaries of the latest research findings; details about federal, state and school district initiatives; and links to several organizations that are closely monitoring the implementation and impact of class-size reduction efforts nationwide.

### What States Are Doing

### Selected Research & Readings

### Other Web Sites

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## Quick Facts

**Class-size spending** - A total of \$3.5 billion was spent on class-size reduction initiatives in the 1999-2000 school year -- \$2.3 billion by states and \$1.2 billion by the federal government. ("[Policy Report: Class Size](#)," ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Spring 2000).[...](#)

**State actions** - Since the mid-1980s, 20 states have implemented class-size reduction measures. ("[State Class-Size Reduction Measures](#)," ECS StateNotes, June 1999) [...](#)

**Teachers added** - With funds available under the federal Class Size Reduction Program, states have hired an estimated 29,000 new teachers since 1999, and average class size in grades 1, 2 and 3 has been reduced by five students (from 23 to 18). ("[Local Success Stories: Reducing Class Size](#)," U.S. Department of Education, November 1999).[...](#)

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## Overview

Reducing the size of classes – particularly in the primary grades – is a popular reform idea embraced by teachers, administrators, parents and a growing number of policymakers. Classes with 25 students or more are simply too large, many people say, to provide the kind of individualized attention students need to succeed.

Since the mid-1980s, 20 states have launched initiatives aimed at reducing class size, mostly in grades K-3. States spent an estimated \$2.3 billion on such efforts in the 1999-2000 school year, according to the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. In addition, the federal government's Class Size Reduction Program, established in 1998, is providing roughly \$1.2 billion a year to help states hire and train new teachers as part of an overall goal of lowering class size in the early grades to no more than 18 students nationwide.

For the most part, research tends to support the notion that smaller classes in the early grades promote effective teaching and learning. While not all studies on the subject have shown that students learn more in smaller settings, most studies have found benefits.

But some states and districts are finding that class-size reduction is both difficult and extraordinarily expensive. For example, California's four-year-old effort to reduce classes to no more than 20 students in the lower grades is costing more than \$1.5 billion a year and has led to critical shortages of qualified teachers, particularly in schools serving poor and minority students. In Detroit, where the school district last year implemented a \$13.2 million program to reduce primary-grade class sizes, progress has been hampered by shortages of both classrooms and teachers.

Some policymakers and researchers believe the costs of reducing class size are prohibitively high, and that the money would be better spent supporting other types of reform. If districts hire the most qualified teachers and support them with ongoing professional development, class size becomes an irrelevant issue, say some critics of the push toward smaller

classes.

Clearly, reducing class size is a significant means of improving student achievement but high academic standards, a challenging curriculum, safe and orderly classrooms, and qualified teachers are no less significant in the arsenal of solid, research-proven reforms. When smaller class size is pursued in conjunction with such reforms, the combined impact on student achievement is far greater than any strategy by itself.

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## Selected Research & Readings

### [Class Size Reduction in California: The 1998-99 Evaluation](#)

[Findings](#) - This report found that California's push to reduce the size of classes in the primary grades has yielded small gains in student achievement. But it also has created a shortage of qualified teachers throughout the grades – particularly in schools serving poor and minority children. (CSR Research Consortium, July 2000) [...](#)

### [Class Size Reduction: Great Hopes, Great Challenges](#) -

Brief summary of the benefits and challenges and some recommendations on reducing class sizes. (WestEd, January 2000).[...](#)

### [Class Size Reduction: Lessons Learned from Experience](#) -

This policy brief analyzes the experiences of class-size reduction programs across the country. (WestEd, August 1998).[...](#)

[Policy Report: Class Size](#) - This paper reviews the latest research on the impact of class size on student achievement and examines several other key topics: the costs of class-size reduction, alternatives to class-size reduction and designing policy for class-size reduction. (ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Spring 2000).[...](#)

### [Reducing Class Size: A Smart Way To Improve America's Urban Schools](#)

- This report is the second in a series of reports on how urban public school systems are using the federal Class Size Reduction Program. It concludes that funds available under the program have become an “essential ingredient” in urban districts' efforts to accelerate student achievement gains, ensure quality teaching and improve low-performing schools. The report includes profiles of class-size reduction efforts in Denver, Fort Worth, New York City, Oklahoma City, Philadelphia and San Francisco. (Council of the Great City Schools, October 2000).[...](#)

### **The Costs and Benefits of Smaller Classes in Wisconsin -**

This report concluded that Wisconsin needs to reexamine its "impetuous rush" to lower class sizes and think instead about improving the quality of its teachers. The report found that smaller classes of about 15 students helped a small population of students – namely, those in kindergarten and African-American students. Beyond that, the report said, the cost of class-size reduction "is not justifiable." (Thomas Hruz, Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, Inc., September 2000)....

### **The Tennessee Study of Class Size in the Early School**

**Grades** - This report summarizes the conclusions of Tennessee's Project STAR (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio), a longitudinal research project which found that (1) students in smaller classes consistently scored higher on achievement and basic skills tests, (2) poor and African-American students appeared to reap the greatest learning gains in smaller classes and (3) the learning gains persisted after students moved back into average-size classes. The report is widely seen as the spark that ignited nationwide interest in the effect of class size on student achievement. (Frederick Mosteller, Center for the Future of Children, 1995)....

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## What States Are Doing



[ECS Selected State Policies: Class Size](#) - Collection from the ECS state policy database. [...](#)



[State Class-Size Reduction Measures](#)  [MS Word](#) -

An ECS StateNote updated in June 1999, this paper provides a detailed look at class-size reduction initiatives in 20 states, including information about funding, legislative provisions and implementation schedules. (Education Commission of the States, June 1999)[...](#)

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