
CSRResearchConsortium

a partnership researching California's class size reduction reform

American Institutes
for Research

RAND

Policy Analysis for
California Education (PACE)

WestEd

EdSource

Press Release

EMBARGOED UNTIL 10:00 A.M. (PT) JUNE 27, 2002

Report available at: www.classsize.org

Contact: Amanda Gaylor, RAND
310-451-6913
amanda_gaylor@rand.org

Michelle Bullwinkle, AIR
650-843-8177
Mbullwinkle@air.org

Evidence Inconclusive That California's Class Size Reduction Program Improves Student Achievement

SAN FRANCISCO, CA, June 27— It is difficult to conclude whether California's popular program to reduce the size of kindergarten through third-grade classes is responsible for recent increases in achievement test scores by elementary school students in the state, according to a study issued today.

The American Institutes for Research (AIR), RAND, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), WestEd, and EdSource have worked together on the study for the past 4 years as part of the CSR Research Consortium, which conducted the evaluation at the request of the California Department of Education.

While achievement scores have risen significantly in California's elementary schools in the last 6 years—during the same period when the Class Size Reduction (CSR) program was implemented—the researchers found it difficult to determine if CSR played a significant role in the rise.

But in spite of their inconclusive findings, the researchers noted that CSR remains highly popular among parents and teachers. Researchers also noted that California's elementary school class sizes are among the largest in the nation. For these reasons, the research team concluded that class size reduction is likely to remain a priority in the state.

Because of the rapidity with which CSR took effect in California, CSR was almost fully implemented in Grades 1 and 2 by the time the CSR Research Consortium study began, making it difficult to evaluate its effects.

Given the compelling evidence for the positive effects of CSR in some other states, especially for minority and low-income students, the researchers recommended that the state test variations of the program—for example even smaller class sizes of 15—in schools with high percentages of those students. The current average class size for grades K-3 under CSR is 20.

The study—*What We Have Learned About Class Size Reduction in California*—suggests that the CSR program's effectiveness could be improved by better integrating and coordinating it with other statewide education reforms. It also recommends giving school districts more flexibility to come up with CSR programs that best meet local needs.

-more-

“Overall, California continues to have some of the most overcrowded elementary school classrooms in the nation and therefore, it is difficult to imagine class size reduction not remaining a priority for the state,” said George W. Bohrnstedt, Senior Vice President for Research at AIR. “Furthermore, parents and teachers overwhelmingly feel that smaller is better, for many reasons other than test scores.” “But the findings,” he said, “show the need for varying the approach with which CSR is used, especially with regard to low-income and minority students who are not benefiting as much as they should from this reform.”

“Many actions are needed to improve schools and improve student performance,” said Brian Stecher, Senior Social Scientist at RAND. “Reducing class size must be combined with other steps to come up with the most successful strategy. For example, the state could create incentives for a small number of districts to experiment with variations of CSR as a way to meet local needs and to improve our knowledge about the cost-effectiveness of CSR for different populations of students.”

“CSR funds could be supplemented by additional resources to better improve the education of California’s students who are most at risk,” said Jerry Hayward of PACE. He was referring to the fact that since CSR was initiated as a freestanding program, California has adopted academic standards and an accountability system that includes additional resources to help turn around low-performing schools.

While CSR was implemented during a period of excess state dollars earmarked for education, the current budget deficit places increased pressure on policymakers to show that programs like CSR are contributing to improved student achievement.

Details of Report Recommendations

The report recommends that California:

- Integrate and align CSR with other reforms and address barriers to its success. The researchers found a lack of cohesion among overall state education reform efforts that have the potential to reduce the effectiveness of reform on the whole. There are 22 programs alone designated to improve teacher preparation, induction, and professional development.
- Allow more local flexibility in applying the class size caps. Local districts should be given the flexibility to vary class sizes by up to two per class as long as the class size average within the schools remains 20 or less. Smaller schools had more difficulty in achieving the state’s required 20 students per class since grade groups are not easily divisible into groups of 20. Schools with too many or too few students per class risk losing state CSR funding. Class size reduction must be the means to an end, not the end in itself.
- Further test CSR’s potential to improve achievement by designing state-sponsored pilot programs with even smaller class sizes in schools serving low-income and minority students. With CSR so widely and uniformly in practice, the state is well-placed to undertake controlled field experiments to evaluate the costs and benefits of smaller classes of 15 or fewer for students most in need.

- Allow districts to experiment with alternatives that better meet local needs. For example, allow a small group of districts to use CSR funds to create alternative small-class arrangements that cost the same and offer opportunities to compare the effect of different class sizes. Some alternatives include: K-3 classes of less than 20 for socioeconomically disadvantaged students or those not proficient in English, and greater than 20 for affluent students; allowing classes of less than 20 for novice teachers and more than 20 for veterans; classes of 15 for kindergarten and first grade, with 25 in grades 2 and 3.

The researchers also recommend that California increase its capacity to provide qualified teachers and facilities before it expands CSR to higher grades; improve its data system so that reforms may be adequately assessed and measured; evaluate pilot programs before creating new statewide programs; match financial resources with student needs so that students most in need are not left behind; adopt a more comprehensive research strategy; and allow sufficient implementation time for large initiatives.

##