

Press Release

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NEW STUDY FINDS THAT CALIFORNIA CLASS SIZE REDUCTION PROGRAM MAY BE AFFECTED BY TIGHTER DISTRICT BUDGETS

SACRAMENTO, Calif., February 4 – An ongoing evaluation of the Class Size Reduction (CSR) program has found that California school districts continue to push for smaller classes in kindergarten through third grade, despite a teacher shortage and budget constraints. The researchers found no relationship between statewide student achievement and statewide participation in class size reduction.

These are the latest findings of the most recent report by a consortium headed by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and RAND, and including Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), EdSource and WestEd. The consortium is examining the efficacy of the state's five-year-old, \$6 billion CSR program.

Other findings, based on data through the end of June 2001, include:

- Ninety-seven percent of K–3 students were enrolled in classes of 20 or fewer pupils, and 99 percent of all eligible districts were participating in the program. For the first time, districts serving high percentages of low-income, minority, and English learner students were just as likely to have implemented CSR as other districts.
- The decline in teacher qualifications (education, credentials, and experience) in elementary schools has leveled off, but it remains substantial, with roughly 15% of elementary teachers not being fully credentialed. As in the past, teachers with less than full credentials were more likely to be located in elementary schools serving low-income, minority, and English learner populations. The gap between schools serving many low-income students and schools serving few low-income students did not decline substantially from last year; it has been at about 17 percentage points since the second year of the program. The study also finds a decline in teacher qualifications in middle schools and high schools, which now have levels of uncredentialed teachers similar to those found in elementary schools.

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- Roughly two-thirds of the districts report that they have to take money from other program areas to cover the cost of CSR. This includes taking resources from libraries, after-school programs, and professional development.
- Teachers continue to report spending more time working with individual students as a result of CSR, and disruptions are fewer in small classes. However, CSR has not fundamentally changed the content or methods of K–3 instruction.
- Test scores are increasing, but the increase cannot be attributed specifically to CSR.
- There have been no CSR-related changes in the percentage of K–3 students needing special education services or in the percentage of special education students placed in special day classes.

The researchers point to factors that may pressure school districts to withdraw from the program.

“There are a number of reasons why districts may be facing budget shortfalls and there are a number of possible solutions,” says RAND senior scientist Georges Vernez. “The Irvine school district decided to eliminate CSR in third grade as part of a package of budget-cutting measures. Other districts may opt to follow if they face similar constraints.”

Added George Bohrnstedt, senior vice president for research at AIR, “For many districts, teacher salaries may be growing at a faster rate than state reimbursements. So the deficit associated with CSR may be growing, too.”

Brian Stecher, senior social scientist at RAND noted, “It would be nice if we could give an unequivocal answer to the achievement question. Then people could decide if the benefits were worth the extra cost. Unfortunately, we can’t. The state launched so many new programs at the same time that it is difficult to separate out their effects from that due to CSR.”

The report updates findings from the previous two annual reports. The Consortium’s final capstone report from the four-year evaluation will be issued this summer and will contain more detailed policy recommendations.

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Class Size Reduction in California: The 1999-00 and 2000-01 Findings will be available at 9:30 a.m., Monday, February 4, at www.classize.org, the web site of the Class Size Reduction Research Consortium.