



THE LASTING BENEFITS OF SMALL CLASSES

Efforts to justify staffing cuts in government schools continue to include claims that class sizes have little impact on teaching and learning outcomes.

Such claims ignore the now substantial evidence from research which clearly demonstrates the benefits of reduced class sizes. (See AEU Fact Sheet No. 1 January 1995). Latest research reports provide further confirmation of the importance of class sizes.

PROJECT STAR

One of the most significant and controlled studies of the impact of class size has been undertaken in Tennessee, U.S.A.

Project STAR (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio) analysed student achievement and development in small classes of 13 - 17, regular classes of 22 - 25 and regular classes with a teacher and full-time teacher aide.

More than 7000 students were tracked from kindergarten through to grade three. The study showed that reduced class size in grades K-3 'significantly enhanced student achievement' (Pate-Bain et al 1992), with particular benefit for minority students (Achilles 1996). While the positive effects of smaller classes were demonstrated particularly in achievements in mathematics and reading, (Watson & Sawyer 1996), advantages have turned up in other core subject areas also (Bracey 1995).

Students in small classes outperformed those in larger classes in all grades and these benefits were cumulative. In kindergarten, small classes made up 55% of the top scoring 10% of STAR classes. By third grade, the small classes made up 78% of the top 10% of classes (Pate-Bain et al 1992).

Teachers involved in Project STAR said that smaller classes meant that basic instruction was completed more quickly, providing increased time for additional and supplementary materials, and more use of enrichment activities. There were more opportunities for children to engage in first hand learning activities.

There was more in-depth teaching of basic content and more time to meet individual learners' needs using a variety of instructional approaches. In addition, class size appeared to have been a contributing factor to the success of the most effective teachers (Pate-Bain et al 1992).

LASTING BENEFITS

The subsequent Lasting Benefits Study has continued to track students who had been involved in Project STAR: *The Lasting Benefits Study results show that in 8th grade, students who had small classes in grades K-3 remain significantly ahead of those who were in regular classes.*(Achilles 1996)

Project Challenge was a policy application of STAR's findings in 16 of the State's poorest districts. Again the results have been clear:

On average, poor districts participating in Project Challenge have moved from well below to somewhat above the state average performance in 3rd grade reading and math scores as they have reduced class sizes.(Achilles 1996)

Subsidiary studies of STAR data have found that while small classes benefit all students, disadvantaged students benefit the most. Students receive more individual attention, there are fewer discipline problems, students are more likely to participate in activities, and fewer students are held back a grade (Achilles 1996).

Tennessee found the results of the study so compelling that it provided over \$100 million to reduce class sizes in primary schools to 25 pupils:

Since then, educational standards in Tennessee, previously at the bottom of the academic performance tables in the USA, have since risen markedly...(Watson & Sawyer 1996)

A further injection of funds is planned to bring classes down to 20 by the year 2000 (Watson & Sawyer 1996). Classes of 17 in grades K-13 have been mandated by 2002, and Tennessee has funded the mandate (Bracey 1995).

Eleven US states have cited Project STAR in passing legislation either to reduce or to cap class size in the early grades. (Bracey 1995)

One of the flaws in much of the earlier class size research has been its short-term nature. Project STAR has been the basis of significant longitudinal research, which has shown the cumulative and ongoing benefits of smaller class sizes.

Watson & Sawyer (1996) report that a Californian research team has calculated the cumulative impact of reduced class sizes:

If class sizes were reduced from, say, 29 to 23, the research team calculated that students who would have graduated from high school at the 50th percentile in academic achievement could be expected to reach as high as the 66th percentile.

RESOURCES MATTER

In 1994, NSW appointed 100 additional kindergarten/Year 1 teachers to 100 schools as a focussed resource to lift literacy standards in the early years of schooling. An evaluation by the NSW Department of School Education showed that provision of the additional K-1 teacher had facilitated the provision of a variety of literacy strategies for students, improved their self-esteem, and enabled early childhood teachers to cater more effectively for the individual needs of students. Respondents indicated that this had resulted in a considerable improvement in the students' academic performance and social behaviour (NSW DSE 1994).

Over the three month period being evaluated, the study reported a positive influence on student achievement. Approximately 40% of students progressed to a higher level in reading, writing, talking and listening. Student progress within existing levels was not reflected in the outcome data.

An additional 100 teachers have been added to the program for a two year period.

TEACHER & PARENT RESPONSES

Notwithstanding the attitudes of apologists for reduced school resources, parents and teachers have long recognised the importance of class sizes to teaching and learning.

In Victoria, for example, class sizes have increased markedly as a result of massive cuts to school staffing. The Auditor-General in 1995 found that class sizes had increased in 60 per cent of schools, and in 75 per cent of secondary colleges. A recent survey undertaken by Newspoll Market Research for the Victoria Foundation found that 54.8% of parents believed that class sizes had increased in their child's school over the last 3-4 years, and 74.1% thought that smaller classes would be better for their children.

In the United Kingdom, which has gone further down the path of self-management than Australian systems, class sizes have been increasing. A primary class size survey undertaken by Professor Neville Bennett of Exeter University (Hofkins 1994) showed that 96% of parents thought class size affected the quality of teaching and learning. Two-thirds believed that classes of 26-30 were too large, and 90 per cent thought that classes of over 30 were too big. Teachers strongly argued that class sizes had an impact on their teaching, and 82% said they would change their classroom practices if numbers were reduced. Parents, teachers and school governors agree that 'lack of time for individual children is the biggest detrimental effect of big classes'.

Class size is now a major political issue in the UK, with politicians from all parties under pressure from the voters, the media and teacher unions to commit themselves to providing to education the resources needed to lower class sizes.

READING

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