

California Class Size Reduction: Let's Get It Right

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In July of 1996, the California legislature passed Senate Bill 1777 in an effort to improve student achievement by reducing student-teacher ratios in grades K-3 at a cost of over one billion dollars each year (Stecher & Bohrnstedt, 2002). Rarely has a school reform been met with such widespread support. Current implementation of Class Size Reduction (CSR) in California, however, has lacked essential elements, such as planning, and funding for necessary classroom infrastructure and enough properly trained teachers. These elements, we contend, are critical to realize the potential impact of class size reduction to student achievement. California needs to fully fund and support its initial investment in class size reduction and then plan for an expansion of the program.

The establishment of CSR was based on educational research demonstrating the effectiveness of the program. Biddle and Berliner (2002) summarize the results of several studies done that indicate, especially for students in the lower grades, significant gains for students in classes smaller than twenty. Tennessee's Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) project and Wisconsin's Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program are examples of effective CSR. The STAR project compared student achievement between students placed in regular classes, regular classes with an instructional aide and reduced class sizes over a four year period. The study showed significant differences for students in small reading and math classes (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). The gains for low-income students were more pronounced when compared to low-income students in larger classes. The study continued to track the students in the reduced sized classes through twelfth grade and indicated that the gains were sustained through twelfth grade and showed up in college entrance exams (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). The results of Wisconsin's SAGE program demonstrated similar results.

In an effort to replicate the successes in student achievement seen in both Tennessee's project STAR and Wisconsin's SAGE, California implemented CSR in one fell swoop, virtually affecting 1.8 million students simultaneously. Although the California legislation allowed a phase-in, political pressure and financial incentives resulted in the vast majority of districts implementing CSR only six weeks after the legislation passed (Stecher, Bohrnstedt, Kirst, McRobbie & Williams, 2001). Both STAR and SAGE had utilized an implementation process that was designed to adequately study the effects of CSR. Both states phased in CSR, starting with a limited number of school districts. Longitudinal data was collected and analyzed, the results of which were then shared with other districts within the state as CSR expanded to include more students. This is in stark contrast to California's process. Plans to evaluate the California program were not developed until after CSR had been instituted. Although the state has studied the effectiveness of CSR in California, researchers did not find a strong association between achievement and CSR participation (Stecher & Bohrnstedt, 2002). Student achievement has increased during CSR's implementation, yet California has implemented a number of new programs at the same time as CSR, making it impossible to attribute achievement gains solely to CSR.

Lost in the rush to adopt this monumental movement to lower class size was an examination of the long-term problems associated with needing more teachers and additional classroom space. The implementation of statewide CSR compounded the already existing teacher shortage problem by creating a need for thousands of new teachers, increasing the teaching force in the state by 38% in two years (Stecher, Bohrnstedt, Kirst, McRobbie & Williams, 2001). This sudden need brought into the workforce a flood of teachers without credentials. In 1995, only 1.8% of K-3 teachers were not fully credentialed. That number rose significantly to 12.5% in 1997 as the demands of staffing for CSR took effect (Stecher & Bohrnstedt, 2002).

Hardest hit by this were low-income schools which saw qualified and experienced teachers leave for teaching positions in higher income areas. As a result, the number of non-credentialed teachers rose to 20% in low-income schools (Stecher & Bohrnstedt, 2002). CSR brought predictable challenges to all districts however, the brunt of the impact was born by those schools already facing economic and cultural challenges.

Before expansion of CSR, proper funding is necessary for current CSR needs. In 1996, California's economy was booming. Surpluses made it possible to direct much needed money toward the state educational system. In 1996-1997, the state reimbursed \$650 for each child in a reduced size class. In 1997-8, the per-student rate was \$800 with an increase to \$832 during the third year (Stecher, Bohrnstedt, Kirst, McRobbie & Williams, 2001). However, two-thirds of districts report state reimbursements for CSR are insufficient to support the cost, and the CSR program requires many school districts to

reallocate funds away from a variety of support and educational programs to keep it operational (Stecher & Bohrnstedt, 2002). Consequently, some districts are being forced to make decisions to reduce the grades served with CSR. To fully support CSR, adequate state funding is necessary for the increase in the number of teachers and necessary facilities

The state of California must take several critical issues into account for the program to be effective. Research demonstrates that class size reduction is a program that can be very effective if implemented correctly. Let's get it right, even with the budget deficit the state now faces.

- Commit adequate funding.
- Build necessary facilities.
- Ensure a credentialed teacher for every classroom.

References

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