



class size matters

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To the Lawrence, Kansas school board:

I urge you to not to increase class sizes in your elementary schools. Reducing class size, particularly in the early grades, is one of the very few educational strategies proven to increase learning and narrow the achievement gap.

Yet your committee report, posted at <http://www.usd497.org/documents/Research.pdf>, includes the following statement:

Class size alone is not as important to student achievement as other factors such as quality teaching and effective teacher/student relationships. Research results on the relationship of class size to student achievement are inconsistent and do not lead to a universal or absolute number of students per classroom.

To the contrary, the Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of the US Department of Education, concludes that class size reduction is one of only four, evidence-based education reforms that have been shown to increase student achievement through rigorous, randomized experiments -- the "gold standard" of research.¹

Another statement from your subcommittee report is also incorrect: ***“Reducing class sizes from, for example, 25 students to 15 students, has minimal effects on student achievement.”***

Few if any class size researchers would agree with this statement. Indeed, the STAR experiment from Tennessee, widely regarded as one of the best studies in the history of public education, found significantly different outcomes for students depending on what class size they were randomly assigned within this range. Those who were placed in smaller classes of 13–17 students scored significantly higher on tests, received better grades, and exhibited improved attendance and behavior than those assigned to classes of 22–26 students.²

¹ U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, “Identifying and Implementing Educational Practices Supported by Rigorous Evidence: a User Friendly Guide,” December 2003. The other three K-12 reforms cited are one-on-one tutoring by qualified tutors for at-risk readers in grades 1-3, life-skills training for junior high students, and instruction for early readers in phonics.

² Jeremy D. Finn, et.al, “The Enduring Effects of Small Classes,” Teachers College Record, Vol. 103, 2001; Jeremy D. Finn, “Small Classes in American Schools; Research, Practice and Politics,” Phi Beta Kappan, March 2002 ; Spyros Konstantopoulos and Vicki Chun, “What are the Long-term Effects of Small Classes on the Achievement Gap? Evidence from the Lasting Benefits Study,” American Journal of Education 116, November 2009.

The benefits of reduced class size lasted throughout a student's educational career. In 4th, 6th, and 8th grade, students who were in a smaller class in the early grades were ahead of their peers academically. In high school, they had lower drop-out rates, higher grades, and received better results on their college entrance exams.³ For those who had attended a smaller class, the difference between black and white students taking college entrance exams was cut in half.⁴ Free-lunch students who had been in a small class for four years in the early grades had double the graduation rate of their peers.⁵

A recent re-analysis of the STAR data reveals that as young adults, students who were randomly assigned to smaller classes had higher incomes, were more likely to have a 401K3 and to own their own home.⁶

Experts in public health experts have also concluded that class size reduction is likely to have large benefits in terms of health outcomes— even rivaling investments in vaccines-- with nearly two more years of life projected for children who were placed in smaller classes in the early grades.⁷

Students who benefit the most are those who need the most help: those from poor and minority backgrounds. Alan Krueger of Princeton, the former chief economist of the U.S. Treasury and Labor Departments, has estimated that reducing class size in the early grades shrinks the achievement gap by about 38 percent, and that the economic benefits outweigh the costs two to one.⁸

The committee instead proposed other “other goals” including:

- *Attracting, developing, and retaining high quality teachers*
- *Improving teacher quality and clarity in the classroom*
- *Strengthening teacher-student relationships*

Clearly, one of the best ways to strengthen teacher-student relationships is to reduce class size. Even the best teachers cannot do their best and provide all their students with the individualized support they need in large classes. In national surveys, educators overwhelmingly respond that the most effective way to improve the quality of teaching would be to lower class size. In a 2008 survey, 76 percent of teachers said that reducing class size would be “a very effective” way of improving teacher quality, and 21 percent responded that it would be an “effective” method -- for a total of 97

3 Helen Pate-Bain, 1999, "Effects of Class-Size Reduction in the Early Grades (K-3) on High School Performance," HEROS Inc.

4 Alan B. Krueger and Diane M. Whitmore, January 2001. "Would Smaller Classes Help Close the Black-White Achievement Gap?" in John E. Chubb and Tom Loveless, eds., Bridging the Achievement Gap, Brookings Institution Press 2002

5 Jeremy D. Finn, Susan B. Gerber, Jayne Boyd Zaharias, “Small Classes in the Early Grades, Academic Achievement, and Graduating From High School,” Journal of Educational Psychology, 2005.

6 Raj Chetty et.al., “How does your Kindergarten Classroom Affect Your Earnings? Evidence from Project STAR,” March 2011.

7 Peter Muennig and Steven H. Woolf, "Health and Economic Benefits of Reducing the Number of Students per Classroom in US Primary Schools," American Journal of Public Health,”Sept 27, 2007.

8 Krueger and Whitmore, 2001.

percent -- far outstripping every other reform cited. 9 Moreover, in several studies, class size reduction has been found to result in significantly lower teacher attrition and migration rates – which would be expected to result in a more experienced and effective teaching force overall. 10

Another important goal your subcommittee has proposed was **“Creating environments that encourage and promote meaningful parent involvement in each school, particularly at the K-3 level.”**

Studies have shown that parental involvement increases when class sizes are smaller, as teachers have more time to reach out to individual parents, not just when their children are struggling but also when they are doing well, strengthening their communication and relationship. With a smaller class, there is also more time for individual meetings with parents, either on parent/teacher night or on other occasions. In schools where class size has been reduced, parents are also more likely to be involved and to volunteer in the classroom.¹¹

A definitive analysis commissioned by the US Department of Education looked at achievement levels of students in 2,561 schools across the nation, as measured by their performance on the national NAEP assessments. The sample included at least 50 schools in each state, including large and small, urban and rural, affluent and poor areas. After controlling for student background, the only objective factor found to be correlated with higher student success as measured by test scores was class size –not school size, not teacher qualifications, nor any other variable that could be identified.¹²

In short, if you care about student achievement and improving health and economic outcomes, as well as narrowing the achievement gap, lowering teacher retention rates and strengthening parental involvement, you will invest in smaller classes and provide the children of Lawrence, Kansas with the quality education they deserve.

Yours,

Leonie Haimson, Executive Director

9 Public Agenda, “Lessons Learned, Issue No. 3: New Teachers Talk About Their Jobs, Challenges and Long-Range Plans,” May 26, 2008.

10 Emily Pas, “The Effect of Class Size Reduction on Teacher Attrition and Recruitment: Evidence from Class Size Reduction Policies in New York State,” 2005; see also Lawrence P. Gallagher, “Class Size Reduction and Teacher Migration: 1995–2000,” in: Technical Appendix of the Capstone Report, Part C, CSR Research Consortium, 2002. In California, teacher migration rates dropped sharply after class sizes were reduced, especially in schools with 30% or more low-income students.

11 Cathleen Stasz , et.al., "Teaching Mathematics and Language Arts," p. 67 in: Brian M. Stecher and George W. Bohrnstedt eds., Class Size Reduction in California: Findings from 1999-00 and 2000-01, February 2002.

12 Donald McLaughlin and Gili Drori, School-Level Correlates of Academic Achievement: Student Assessment Scores in SASS Public Schools, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2000. See also David Grissmer, et.al. Improving Student Achievement: What State NAEP Test Scores Tell Us. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000, which had similar results from analyzing national test score data from 44 states to look at the effect of different educational factors on student achievement. The study showed that, controlling for students’ family backgrounds, states with the lowest class size in the early grades had the highest NAEP scores.