



Thank you for your request to our REL Reference Desk regarding evidence-based information about class limits. Ask A REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the ten regional educational laboratories (REL) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. It provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations on research based education questions.

The information below represents the most rigorous research available. Researchers consider the type of methodology and give priority to research reports that employ well described and thorough methods. The resources were also selected based on the date of the publication with a preference for research from the last ten years. Additional criteria for inclusion include the source and funder of the resource

Question: *Our state legislature is considering raising the class size limits. Is there evidence on the effectiveness of class size limits?*

Search Process

Key words and search strings used in the search: *class size AND student performance AND elementary*

Search databases and websites: Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>), ERIC (<http://www.eric.ed.gov>)

Sample Citations Retrieved:

Finn, J. D., & Achilles, C. M. (1999). Tennessee's class size study: Findings, implications, misconceptions. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 21(2), 97-109.
doi: 10.3102/01623737021002097

Summary/Abstract: After years of debate, speculation, and research, Tennessee's Project STAR produced clear answers to the question, "Do small classes result in improved academic achievement in the elementary grades?" This article describes the features that made STAR unique and summarizes the findings with regard to pupil performance and behavior. New analyses show the magnitudes of the "small-class advantage" during and after the 4-year experimental period. The positive findings of STAR have been greeted with enthusiasm by the education community and are providing impetus for class size reduction (CSR) efforts in many districts. At the same time, some detractors continue to oppose the idea. Although they usually do not take issue with the strength of the STAR design, they disagree that the findings warrant CSR initiatives in most cases. This article examines those arguments critically. Finally, recommendations are offered for policymakers, education practitioners, and researchers for using

the information learned to date about the relationship of class size with students' academic achievement.

Cho, H., Glewwe, P., & Whitley, M. (2012). Do reductions in class size raise students' test scores? Evidence from population variation in Minnesota's elementary schools. *Economics of Education Review*, 31, 77-95. doi: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2012.01.004

Summary/Abstract: Many U.S. states and cities spend substantial funds to reduce class size, especially in elementary (primary) school. Estimating the impact of class size on learning is complicated, since children in small and large classes differ in many observed and unobserved ways. This paper uses a method of Hoxby (2000) to assess the impact of class size on the test scores of grade 3 and 5 students in Minnesota. The method exploits random variation in class size due to random variation in births in school and district catchment areas. The results show that reducing class size increases mathematics and reading test scores in Minnesota. Yet these impacts are very small; a decrease of ten students would increase test scores by only 0.04–0.05 standard deviations (of the distribution of test scores). Thus class size reductions are unlikely to lead to sizeable increases in student learning.

Whitehurst, G. J. & Chingos, M. M. (2011). *Class size: What research says and what it means for state policy*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2011/5/11%20class%20size%20whitehurst%20chingos/0511_class_size_whitehurst_chingos.pdf

Summary/Abstract: Class size is one of the small number of variables in American K-12 education that are both thought to influence student learning and are subject to legislative action. Legislative mandates on maximum class size have been very popular at the state level. In recent decades, at least 24 states have mandated or incentivized class-size reduction (CSR). The current fiscal environment has forced states and districts to rethink their CSR policies given the high cost of maintaining small classes. The substantial expenditures required to sustain smaller classes are justified by the belief that smaller classes increase student learning. The authors examine "what the research says" about whether class-size reduction has a positive impact on student learning and, if it does, by how much, for whom, and under what circumstances. Despite there being a large literature on class-size effects on academic achievement, only a few studies are of high enough quality and sufficiently relevant to be given credence as a basis for legislative action.

Referrals

Organizations:

- Center for Educational Reform, <http://edreform.com>



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- National Association for the Education of Young Children, <http://www.naeyc.org/>
 - National Association of Elementary School Principals, <http://www.naesp.org/>

Federally Funded Resources:

- US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Resources, <http://ies.ed.gov>
Publication search engine available at: <http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/>
- What Works Clearinghouse, <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>

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