



Surprise - Public School Class Size Doesn't Matter Very Much

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It turns out that smaller class size does not guarantee that children get a better education in public school. Rather, teacher quality and instruction methods are far more important.

PR9.NET August 07, 2005 - In his new book, "Public Schools, Public Menace," author Joel Turtel explains why class size in public schools doesn't affect education quality very much. It turns out that teacher quality and instruction methods are far more important.

School authorities often complain that classes are too large. They claim that teachers can't be expected to give their students the individual attention they need if there are too many students in the class. On the surface, this excuse seems to have some merit. Common sense tells us that in smaller classes, teachers can give more time and attention to each student.

However, many studies show that smaller class size does not guarantee that children get a better education. The pupil-to-teacher ratio in public schools in the mid-1960s was about 24 to 1. This ratio dropped to about 17 to 1 by the early 1990s, which means the average class size fell by 28 percent. Yet, during the same time period, SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) test scores fell from 954 to 896, a decline of 58 points or 6 percent. In other words, student academic achievement (as measured by SAT scores) dropped at the same time that class sizes got smaller.

Eric Hanushek, a University of Rochester economist, examined 277 published studies on the effects of teacher-pupil ratios and class-size averages on student achievement. He found that only 15 percent of these studies showed a positive improvement in achievement with smaller class size, 72 percent found no statistically significant effect, and 13 percent found a negative effect on achievement.

It seems to go against common sense that student academic achievement could drop with smaller class sizes. One reason this happens in public schools is that when class sizes drop, schools have to create more classes to cover all the students in the school. Schools then have to hire more teachers for the increased number of classes. However, public schools across the country are already having trouble finding qualified teachers to fill their classrooms. As a result, when reduced class sizes increase the need for more teachers, schools then often have to hire less-qualified teachers.

Teacher Quality and Teaching Methods Are Far More Important

As we might expect, teacher quality is far more important than class size in determining how children do in school. William Sanders at the University of Tennessee studied this issue. He found that teacher quality is almost twenty times more important than class size in determining students' academic achievement in class. As a result, reducing class sizes can lead to the contrary effect of hurting students' education, rather than helping.

Similarly, a study on class size by policy analyst Jennifer Buckingham of the Sydney-based Center for Independent Studies found no reliable evidence that students in smaller classes do better academically or that teachers spend significantly more time with them in these classes. Buckingham concluded that a 20 percent class-size reduction cost the Australian government an extra \$1,150 per student, yet added only an additional two minutes of instruction per day for each child.

Reducing class sizes can't solve the underlying problems with public schools. No matter how small classes become, nothing will help if the teachers are ill-trained or their teaching methods are useless or destructive. For example, if teachers use whole-language or "balanced" reading instruction, they can cripple students' ability to read no matter how small the classes are. Even if classrooms had one teacher for every student, that child's ability to read could still be crippled if the teacher used these reading-instruction methods. In fact, smaller class sizes could give the teacher more time to hurt (not intentionally) each student's reading ability.

Here's an analogy on this issue of class size vs. teaching methods: Suppose a horseback-riding instructor was teaching one little girl to ride. This instructor's teaching method was to tell the bewildered girl to sit backwards on the horse, facing the horse's rump, and control the horse by holding its tail. Does it matter that the student-teacher ratio in this horseback-riding class is one-to-one if the instructor is an idiot or uses bad teaching methods?

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About liberty books

Liberty Books publishes "Public Schools, Public Menace: How Public Schools Lie To Parents and Betray Our Children," by Joel Turtel. We also publish "The Welfare State: No Mercy For the Middle Class," my John McKay.

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