



Classroom Size: Fertilizer To Grow Government

by Arlan DeBlieck

Governor Vilsack signed an education appropriations bill that increased spending on education by roughly 5.3%. The focal point of this bill was to fund programs designed to reduce the "pupil-to-teacher" ratio (often referred to as "class-size"). However, as studies and the chart below show, lowering the class size does not guarantee an improvement in student performance. What it does accomplish is a growth in government and a need for more revenue.

According to Eric A. Hanushek, an economist and authority on class size, "... [t]here is little systematic gain from a general reduction in class size."¹ Since the 1950s, class sizes have been declining (35% over the last 45 years).² Class sizes have dropped from an average of 30 students to today's class average of 22.³ Regardless of the lower class sizes, standardized test scores declined as well.

The chart below indicates that reducing class size and increasing spending per student do not guarantee better performance. In 1996, Utah had the highest pupil-to-teacher ratio than any other state, yet it spent the least amount of money per student. If class size was a factor, then Utah should be near the bottom in every achievement category measured, yet they are not. In fact, in most categories, they rank right with Iowa.

Performance Measures (1996)	IA		TN		UT		NJ	
		State Ranking		State Ranking		State Ranking		State Ranking
Spending : Student	\$5,421.0	33	\$5,179.0	39	\$3,695.0	50	\$9,704.0	1
Pupil : Teacher	15.3	35	17.4	11	23.1	1	13.8	48
High School Completion Rate	91.6%	10	83.3%	41	91.3%	12	87.0%	31
*ACT Scores (Ave Score)	22.1	3	19.8	24	21.6	7	NA	NA
*SAT Scores (Ave Score)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1005	12
AFQT Scores (Percentile)	65.4	3	60	33	62.5	20	60.0	35
Science Proficiency Scores, 8th grade	158.0	6	143.0	30	156.0	11	NA	NA
Math Proficiency Scores, 8th grade	284.0	1	263.0	31	270.0	12	NA	NA

* Some regions favor one scholastic test over the other. This is the reason New Jersey has SAT vs ACT scores.
Source: Chart compiled from CQ's State Fact Finder 1999: Rankings Across America

Looking again at the chart, New Jersey has the highest spending per student and one of the lowest pupil-to-teacher ratios, yet it does not score near the top in any of the achievement categories. Rhode Island (not shown) had the lowest pupil-to-teacher ratio at 13.3, yet had comparable scores to New Jersey.

Governor Vilsack referred to Tennessee's Department of Education study on class size (Project STAR -- Student Achievement Ratio) during the budget debate as a reason to reduce class size and increase spending on education. Even though Tennessee does not come close to achieving the results Iowa does, the Governor wants to use Tennessee as the education model for Iowa. If we are determined to follow rather than lead, Utah may have a better "best-cost" model for education.

Class size does not guarantee performance, but as the Iowa Legislature demonstrated this past session, it does guarantee a hefty cost. In order to reduce the pupil-to-teacher ratio, more

teachers will need to be hired and additional structural space obtained. What happens if the achievement goals are not met with this budget increase? Iowans get stuck maintaining additional buildings and larger bureaucracies that come with reducing class size programs.

If studies show that class size has a negligible impact on performance, why are politicians from both parties, at both the federal and state levels of government, pushing this concept so hard? It's an easy sell. Teachers like it because it makes their jobs easier. Parents like it because they believe their children will get more attention. The teacher unions like it because of the potential growth in membership dues. Local communities like it because the federal and state governments pay most of the bill.

There are at least three compelling reasons not to pursue class size reduction programs as a means of improving student performance. The first is a lack of credible evidence that smaller class sizes will increase performance.⁴ In addition to Eric Hanushek's studies, Asian countries are accepted as having better performing students than the U.S., but their average class sizes range between forty and fifty students. "If this were health care, the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) would not let such a drug onto the market."⁵

The second reason is there are "better-cost" alternatives. Many researchers believe poor performance, even with reduced class sizes, results from having teachers unqualified to teach their subjects.⁶ Most have been taught "how" to teach, but not instructed in the subjects they teach. The marginal return on a dollar spent for class size reduction is much less than other alternatives. With the money that politicians want to spend on reducing class size, "...[e]very one of the nation's 2.7 million teachers" could receive a \$4500 tuition voucher to get the training they need in subjects they teach.⁷

Finally, class-reducing programs are mostly funded by the federal government. The money comes with a lot of strings attached. Most of the policies intrude upon local authority and build larger bureaucratic structures. As evidenced by Marc Tucker's "Dear Hillary" letter, it is the Clinton administration's goal to align the U.S. educational system with other countries around the world. In order to do this, absolute control must come from Washington.⁸ Class-reducing programs enable Washington to gain this control.

Programs designed to reduce class sizes are not only expensive in terms of money, but expensive in terms of lost freedoms. Education is a local responsibility. Federal and state money (mandates) should only be looked at when everything else has failed.

Endnotes:

1. Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Michael J. Petrilli, "The Elixir of Class Size," as edited for the Weekly Standard, (Washington D.C.: Weekly Standard, March 9, 1998, p. 16). Chester Finn is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and John M. Olin Fellow at the Hudson Institute. Michael Petrilli is a researcher at the Hudson Institute.
2. Cathy McKenna, "Educational Necessity or Hype: Is Class Size Really Important?" Parent Power, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (Washington D.C.: The Center for Education Reform, May 1999).
3. Finn and Petrilli, p. 16.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid* pp. 16-17.
7. *Ibid* p. 17.
8. U. S. Congress. House. Representative Schaffer of Colorado submitted Marc Tucker's November 11, 1992 letter to Hillary Clinton on how to nationalize the entire U.S. educational system, during debate on "Dollars To The Classroom Act" (H.R. 3248). 105th Cong., 2d sess. Congressional Record 25SE, pt. 3 (25 September 1998), E1819-E1825.

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