

The Facts on Education

Do Smaller Classes Improve Learning?

Smaller classes are popular with parents and teachers; however, because reducing class size is a very expensive undertaking, running into hundreds of millions of dollars each year in a large province, it is important to compare this strategy with other alternatives for improving student outcomes.

Many studies have been done on the impact of class size on teaching practices and on student outcomes. Although this research inevitably contains some conflicting findings, there is a significant agreement on some major points:

- Smaller classes in primary grades have been linked with somewhat better student outcomes, but the evidence is much weaker above the primary level.
- Smaller classes may have the greatest positive impact on students with the greatest educational needs.
- Academic gains for students from smaller classes depend on changes in teaching practices, but smaller classes alone do not necessarily lead to changed teaching. Teachers need ongoing support to implement new approaches for smaller classes.
- Fewer children mean more space for classroom activities and may reduce behavioural management issues.
- Changing class size across a whole system is challenging. Teachers need to change what they do, more teachers are needed, more split grade classes may result (though there is no evidence that split grades are harmful to students) and more classrooms are needed.

Evidence to date suggests that smaller classes across an entire system are probably not the most cost-effective way to improve student outcomes when compared with, for example, investing the same money in improving teaching skills. However, the fact that both teachers and parents support smaller classes provides another kind of value.

For parents, it is important to know the size of classes in your school but, even more, to understand the teaching and learning practices being used.

There are numerous online resources available on class size reduction. A few of these, as well as the research references that inform this issue, can be found at:

www.cea-ace.ca/facts-on-education

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