

Why are small classes so effective?

Several credible, long-term studies of the influences of smaller class-sizes in the early grades point to lasting positive results for student learning. A successful early start in small K-3 classes sets a foundation that sustains student learning through elementary and secondary school even when class sizes increase beyond third grade.

The best known of these studies from the State of Tennessee called Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) had rigorous controls with random assignment of students to small or large classes. Some of the large classes had full time teacher aides. The students in the original research project have also been the subjects of detailed follow up studies as they have progressed through the grades.

Key findings from analysis of Tennessee class size data:

1. Statistically significant differences were found between small classes and the two types of regular classes on every achievement measure in every year of the study.
2. The small-class advantage was greatest in the first year that the student entered a small class, whether kindergarten, or first grade, and remained stable through second and third grade.
3. Achievement benefits of small classes in K-3 continued through at least grade eight.
4. In each grade, minorities and students attending inner-city schools enjoyed greater small-class advantages than whites on some or all measures.
5. In grades one to three, all students benefited significantly when a high proportion of their classmates had attended kindergarten.
6. Students in small classes had higher test scores in a wide range of subjects, establishing a solid foundation for a rich life and a rich variety of future careers.
7. The same benefits from small classes were found for boys and girls alike.
8. Every type of district – inner city, urban, suburban, and rural – enjoyed significant gains from small classes.

The Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program in the state of Wisconsin reduces class size in K-3 classrooms to a 15:1 student-to-teacher ratio in qualifying districts. In an analysis comparing findings from the two studies (STAR and SAGE), investigators noted the following shared effects.

Small classes promote higher achievement for a range of mutually reinforcing reasons.

4. Children receive more individualized instructions
5. Teachers can focus more on instruction and less on classroom management

6. Students become more actively engaged in learning than peers in large classes.
7. Teachers identify learning disabilities sooner, but fewer children end up going into special education classes because teachers can support them within small classes.
8. Teachers are more able to give children from low income families and communities a critical supportive adult influence.
9. Teachers are better able to engage family members and to work with parents to further a child's education.

To learn more, go to: www.educationanalysis.org to view the report Student Achievement Smaller Classes and Educational Vouchers: A Research Update