The Value of Small Classes

Although one will hear arguments for and against smaller class size, research demonstrates quite conclusively that especially for young children small classes lead to significant increases in reading and mathematics achievement. The greatest benefit of smaller class sizes is for young children: kindergarten and first grade are when the greatest gains occur, but second and third grade matter as well. Small classes seem to be beneficial because of the greater attention the teacher can pay to each individual child and as a consequence there is less likelihood that a struggling learner will get lost or go unnoticed.

Smaller classes mean between 13 and 17 students in a class. Any more than that and the differences seem to wash away. And there is no real advantage to reducing class size unless it is to at least 17, so reducing the number of students from 28 to 25, for example, has no appreciable effect on students' learning and achievement. (Although this sort of reduction may have other important benefits, such as improving the working conditions for teachers.) The research also shows that classroom aides are not a substitute for smaller classes—children, in classes of more than 17, with or without an aide have similar levels of achievement.

Small classes cost more and so when resources are scarce the research provides some direction on how to use limited resources. Small class size benefits all children, but they are especially beneficial for groups of students who on the average do less well at school and are at greater risk of dropping out. Scarce resources would be wisely used for kids in inner city schools and First Nations children. And given the demonstrable benefit to young children, consistent small classes at kindergarten and first grade are also a priority.

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