

Class Size Reduction (CSR) Overview

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Class Size Reduction Research— Initial Research



Before California designed its K-3 CSR program, the now famous Tennessee project and related research had suggested that:

- ***Achievement Gains Were Associated With Smaller Classes.*** All else constant, students in smaller K-3 classes performed better than students in larger classes.
- ***Achievement Gains Were Sustained for Multiple Years.*** Students in smaller K-3 classes retained their achievement gains in grades four, six, and eight.
- ***Achievement Gains Were Greatest for Minority and Inner-City Children.*** All else constant, minority and inner-city children gained the most from smaller classes—experiencing effects that were two to three times greater than the effect on other students.



Subsequent Research on CSR Raise Notable Concerns



Since California began implementing its K-3 CSR program, additional research has been conducted. Some of this research raises notable concerns, particularly about the cost-effectiveness of CSR.

- ***Effect Concentrated in Earlier Grades.*** Some research has found that CSR is most effective when implemented in kindergarten and first grade and has little or no effect in second and third grade.
- ***Effect on Student Achievement Inconclusive.*** Although no overarching consensus exists regarding the effect of CSR on student achievement, considerable research has found no evidence of overall achievement gains.
- ***Integrated Approaches Yield Better Results.*** States that have integrated CSR with other school improvement efforts have experienced the most positive results. For example, Wisconsin required participating schools to implement a rigorous academic curriculum, before and after school activities, and professional development programs as well as adhere to accountability plans. Unlike many evaluations, it did find significant achievement gains, particularly among minority students.
- ***Teacher Quality More Important Than Class Size.*** Some research finds that teacher quality is much more important than class size.
- ***Expensive Program Substantially Increases Education Costs.*** Much research questions the cost-effectiveness of CSR programs and suggests that other reform efforts are likely to yield better outcomes for less cost.



California's CSR Evaluation— Major Findings

- ☑ In 1996-97—the year California established its K-3 CSR program—it contracted with a group of researchers, known as the CSR Research Consortium, to begin a multiyear evaluation. The CSR Consortium submitted its final evaluation in September 2002.

- ☑ The CSR evaluation uncovered three main findings.
 - ***Achievement Gains Could Not Be Linked to CSR.*** Because California reduced K-3 class size in all schools at the same time, there was no control group and the Consortium could not link any achievement gains directly to CSR.

 - ***California's CSR Program Contributed to Decline in Teacher Quality Statewide.*** The percentage of K-3 teachers who were not fully credentialed increased from less than 2 percent the year before California's CSR program started to 14 percent in the third year of the program.

 - ***Lowest Income Schools Experienced Greatest Decline in Teacher Quality.*** In the year before California's CSR program started, fewer than 4 percent of K-3 teachers serving in the state's most disadvantaged schools were not fully credentialed. By the third year of the program, more than 20 percent of K-3 teachers serving in the lowest income schools were not fully credentialed.

- ☑ ***Bottom Line—Achievement Gains Likely Offset by Decline in Teacher Quality.*** Another study of California's CSR program found that (1) having an inexperienced teacher in the classroom essentially eviscerates any achievement gain likely to result from a smaller class size and (2) some students were much more likely to be taught by inexperienced teachers.



Policy Lessons for Developing Future Education Reforms

- Phase In Future Reforms Beginning With Schools Serving Students With Greatest Need and/or Greatest Potential to Benefit.*** California's CSR program actually might have hurt just those students it was intended most to help. For some future reform efforts, it may be beneficial to start implementation in only a subset of schools each year—starting with schools serving students who have the greatest need and/or the greatest potential to benefit.

- Provide More Local Flexibility.*** Limited flexibility in implementing CSR has led to some adverse consequences, such as busing children to other schools in the district or creating combination classes. More local flexibility would help districts (1) minimize these counterproductive effects and (2) protect their highest priorities, while (3) simultaneously generating notable fiscal savings.



Five Options for Reforming California's CSR Program

- Include K-3 CSR Program in New Academic Improvement Block Grant.*** Consolidate existing K-3 CSR funds into a single block grant that school districts could use for various improvement initiatives. This would promote greater local choice as well as allow for a more streamlined, effective allocation of resources.

- Create Pilot Program to Compare Cost-Effectiveness of CSR and Teacher Initiatives.*** Permit school districts to use existing K-3 CSR funds to implement one of several allowable educational reforms and study cost-effectiveness. Allowable educational reforms might include (1) targeting specific student populations, such as disadvantaged students, (2) targeting specific teacher populations, such as beginning teachers, or (3) providing professional development programs that are embedded within the school day.

- Allow Districtwide Average of 20 to 1 With Class Cap of 22 to 1.*** Although the state's original intent was to reduce K-3 class size to 20 students per class, average K-3 class size was 19.07 students per class in 2001-02. This unintended "undersizing" increases CSR program costs by approximately 5 percent. The Legislature could reduce unintended undersizing by allowing school districts to maintain a districtwide average of 20 students per class rather than having the cap apply to each and every K-3 class. Based on the 2002-03 funding level, this would yield total savings of approximately \$77 million.



Five Options for Reforming California's CSR Program

(Continued)

- Allow Schoolwide Average of 20 to 1 in High-Poverty Schools and 22 to 1 in Low-Poverty Schools.*** Allow average K-3 class size of 20 students for schools that have 50 percent or more of their student body participating in free or reduced priced lunch programs. Increase average K-3 class size to 22 students for schools that have less than 50 percent of their student body participating in free or reduced priced lunch programs. We estimate this would yield a total of \$219 million in savings.

- Refocus Program to Target Only Kindergarten and First Grade.*** Retain CSR in kindergarten and first grade but allow class size to increase in second and third grade. By limiting the program to grades K-1, the Legislature would reduce total costs by approximately 50 percent (or \$830 million).