

CLASS SIZE

The four-year study was the brainchild of Helen Bain, a teacher, researcher, and former president of the National Education Association, who convinced the Tennessee state legislature to invest \$12 million in the four-year project. As a seventh-grade teacher, Bain knew firsthand how much more students could learn in a smaller class and she was determined to prove it. "If you give me 50 kids, forget it, even 35, you can't do a thorough job," says Bain, cofounder of HEROS, Inc., an organization that conducts class size research and is the official holder of the STAR data. "I believe you can do it with 20."

Florida on the Forefront

CURRENTLY, ABOUT HALF THE STATES have class-reduction programs for public schools. Florida passed a constitutional amendment in 2002 that phased in lower class sizes to 18 in grades K-3, 22 in grades 4-8, and 25 in high school. This fall, districts had to meet the cap or face fines.

Bain believes Florida has the right approach. "If I could wave my magic wand, I'd do it in every state," she says.

Not everyone shares Bain's enthusiasm for the mandate. "Some of that \$16 billion should have been spent improving cur-

riculum and making our schools more rigorous. Instead, \$16 billion was drained away to hire more teachers," says Florida state senator Don Gaetz, who contends there is little evidence that class size is a significant determinant of student performance. "The most important factor is an effective teacher."

Bruce Tonjes, associate superintendent in Polk County Public School District, says putting up 1,000 portable classrooms and adding staff has meant a lot of moving around. "It's been quite disruptive. It's a constant battle to have enough teachers available. It's a nice idea, but it's not manageable."

An examination of Florida's state-wide mandate by Matthew Chingos of Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance found insignificant improvement in student performance in grades 3-8 with lower class size. "The study isn't saying you should never, ever reduce class size. But it is saying Florida's policy, which cost billions of dollars, doesn't seem to have made much of a difference in student achievement in that state," says Chingos. "The one-size-fits-all mentality is very rarely a good idea."

Finn criticizes Chingos's study for focusing on grades where the likelihood of finding class size effects is smaller, and says that it overlooks the long-term potential impact of smaller classes in K-2. He also says the differences in class sizes of the two comparison groups in the study—those treated and untreated—are too small to make a difference educationally.

To loosen the class size requirement, Senator Gaetz sponsored an amendment on the ballot this fall that would raise the cap for individual classes and let schools meet the limits on an average basis. "It's a commonsense way to provide some limited local flexibility and avoid the chaos," says Gaetz.

Responding to the Economy

GEORGIA PASSED LEGISLATION MANDATING class size maximums ranging from 18 to 28, varying by grade and subject, beginning in 2006-2007. But in response to the economic downturn, the state board of education in May scrapped the limits on class size (with the consent of the legislature) for this school year.

While not ideal, the move was in recognition of the budget crunch that schools were facing, says Susan Walker, policy and research director at the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education,



CONTRARY VIEW

Teacher Quality Matters More

While it's hard to find experts willing to take a stand against lower class sizes, there are some who question the effectiveness of the state-wide programs currently in place.

For instance, in 2002, Florida voters narrowly agreed to a law reducing average class sizes to 18 for K-3, 22 for fourth through eighth grades, and 25 for high school. A paper by Matthew Chingos, with Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance, examined schools between 2006 and 2009. The schools reduced classes by 3.1 students; however, there were no statistically significant benefits for students of these schools in a number of areas, including

test scores, absenteeism, and school violence.

Research on California's effort to lower class sizes to 20 for the first four years of school—which started in 1996—also fails to correlate gains in achievement to class size.

This is not to say that everyone agrees with the validity of Chingos's findings. Jeremy Finn, a professor of education at the University of Buffalo-SUNY, says one weakness of the Harvard study is that it focuses on how older students do, when it's proven that children fare better over time if exposed to smaller classes at an earlier age. He also argues the schools in the "non-treated" group that Chingos used for comparison already had smaller classes.

Others, such as Chris Whittle, CEO of Edison Schools, and *Washington Post* columnist Jay

Mathews, say that improving teacher quality is more beneficial than reducing class size. Whittle, author of *Crash Course: Imagining a Better Future for Public Education*, put the question in stark terms:

"Which would be better, a bad teacher with 15 kids or a good one with 30?"

Mathews argues paying a higher salary might attract more applicants to teaching and ultimately increase the quality of the teacher pool. Leonie Haimson, executive director of Class Size Matters, a nonprofit that supports smaller class sizes, disagrees, contending that salary is not as much a grievance for teachers as class size—that since the average teacher likely puts less emphasis on salary to begin with, giving them a more manageable class can attract more people to the profession. —Eric Butterman