

Professor: Smaller Class Sizes Optimal For Kids

September 24, 2009

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State budget cuts across the country have meant layoffs for teachers and larger class sizes. Some schools in Los Angeles have as many as 43 students in a class. Jeremy Finn, a professor of education at the State University of New York-Buffalo, says from kindergarten through third grade classes with fewer than 20 students are best.

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MADELEINE BRAND, host:

School has started, and a lot of students are having a hard time finding a seat. That's because state budget cuts across the country have meant teacher layoffs and larger class sizes. Take Los Angeles: Some high schools there have as many as 43 students in a class. So will these kids learn less? Someone who has studied how big is too big is Jeremy Finn. He's a professor of education at SUNY Buffalo.

Welcome to the program.

Dr. JEREMY FINN (Professor of Education, State University of New York): Thank you. Glad to be here.

BRAND: Well, 43 sounds like a lot. Is that too big?

Dr. FINN: Forty-three is too big, yes.

BRAND: Too big, period?

Dr. FINN: Too big, period. There's just a point at which teachers can't really get to know the individual students, can't teach the materials. Students split off into splinter groups and withdraw from the classroom interactions, and 43 is well into that range.

BRAND: So give us a rough ballpark for those kids from kindergarten through third grade, and then higher. What are optimal class sizes, and what are class sizes you can live with?

Dr. FINN: The research has shown definitively that classes of under 20 students, in kindergarten through third grade, have all kinds of advantages. They increase the - both the academic and social engagement of students, and they increase learning. That's especially true for students at risk - that is, minority students from low-income homes, and students for whom English is a second language. In small classes, students' behavior changes even more than does teacher behavior.

BRAND: How is student behavior different in small class sizes?

Dr. FINN: It's because every student is on what I would call the firing line. You can't hide in the back corner of the room. Students are better behaved. They pay more attention. They support each other in learning more, and their - definitely, their achievement scores go up. Furthermore, it's been shown that for children who were in small classes for three or four years, graduation from high school is more likely. Taking college entrance exams is more likely. So these early grades of small classes have long-lasting effects.

BRAND: And by early grades, you're talking kindergarten through third grade.

Dr. FINN: That's correct.

BRAND: I read an article recently in the New Yorker written by Malcolm Gladwell, and it talked a lot about teachers and class size, and I just want to read you a quote from him. He is skeptical that class size is as important as it's made out to be. He writes: You have to cut the average class almost in half to get the same boost that you'd get if you switched from an average teacher to a teacher in the 85th percentile. So in essence, he's saying that teacher competency is better and more important to student achievement than class size.

Dr. FINN: I've heard that argument many times before. There really aren't data that make that comparison directly. But I would argue, and as I have many times, that what you want is both a good teacher and a small class. Imagine what a good teacher could do with a small class.

BRAND: Are there any strategies, though, if parents are just faced with, you know, my kid is going to a high school with 43 kids in every class. What do I tell my son or daughter to do to get the best

education possible in this situation?

Dr. FINN: I wish I had the answer to that because I would tell every parent to do that. There are things a school can do, though, to help students at risk, and one thing is to make the students feel welcome, warmly received and supported in their classes, even if the class is larger than you might like. As simple as the administrator standing at the front door of the school when kids arrive and greeting each kid and talking to them, something about their school day or their morning makes - there actually is a research study on this that's shown that that makes kids feel more warmly received.

BRAND: Jeremy Finn is a professor of education at SUNY Buffalo, and we've been talking about the effects of large class sizes.

Thank you very much.

Dr. FINN: You're quite welcome.

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Daniel Wright (Swamper) wrote:

I read recently that there are an average of 1.1 administrators and managers for every classroom teacher in our K-12 Public Schools across America. Why do we need a bit over one Admin/manager overseeing or supporting each teacher? No school systems duties can possibly be that complex!

It is common knowledge that school system jobs in admin are favored payoff positions for politicians on both sides of the aisle to show appreciation for support. i.e. Daddy gives XXX,XXX dollars to the local politician's campaign fund and Daddy's idiot Son gets a job in the Bowels of the local School Administration System. With each new politician elected, the old jobs stay, and new ones are created for the new guy's cronies.

I'd suggest we set a more modest number (one admin/manager per six teachers sounds a reasonable place to start) for the admin and management end of the scale, thus freeing up vast funds to both hire more teachers, and pay the best ones more.

Friday, September 25, 2009 12:17:58 AM

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Robert Lenton (RobertLenton) wrote:

One great question and one terrible answer. "What do I tell my kids to do if they are in an over crowded class?" Prof. Finn says he does not know! How about meeting with the overworked teacher and seeing what you can do to help? Parents could find out what homework and assignments are due and help them or find somebody that can help. The "system" is broken, but students and parents must find a way to overcome until education is once again valued in our society.

Thursday, September 24, 2009 11:49:35 PM

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Rolando Cedillo (RYC) wrote:

The topic of class sizes was very interesting, I enjoyed learning about balance of a class size to learning. One interesting question that was asked to the speaker was what would you a parent tell his/her child attending such a class size. No answer was provided by the expert, the simple answer is sit in the front or as close to the front of the class where the teacher is. Simple logic closer you are the less distracted you will be by others!

Have a nice evening, by the way love the diversity of your topics.

Thursday, September 24, 2009 8:33:41 PM

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Curt Kovacs (docbabe) wrote:

Note that this study finds improvement in "at risk" students -- read those with ignorant parents.
I went to a Chicago Public Grade School and High School.
Our grade school class was 41. One doctor, me, 2 dentists, one tool & die / mechanical
engineer business owner. one biologist and one minister.

Not scientific, but we did not have stupid parents. Small class size is only a substitute for
parents in a stable family -- destroyed by liberal social policy.

Thursday, September 24, 2009 7:38:37 PM

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Perry Bezanis (perryb) wrote:

small, early-education classes bond beginning pupils to a good teacher. this, in turn, 'preps'
such students for learning in successively larger classes of likewise 'good teachers'. this
whole subject is one of human learning in general -successively higher-order learning by
immersion and subjection to successively higher-order, more complex information.

Thursday, September 24, 2009 6:57:20 PM

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