

Class-size Reduction

Nevada's class-size reduction program, first implemented in FY 1991, is now entering its 34th year. The program was sold on the expectation that reducing pupil-to-teacher ratios in grades K-3 would significantly improve Nevada students' achievement.

To date, Nevadans have spent about \$4 billion out of the state General Fund to hire and retain additional teachers under the program. This figure excludes the costs borne by local school districts for the construction of additional classroom space, heating and cooling that space, and other additional operating expenditures.

In 2021, lawmakers eliminated class-size reduction as a separate line-item within the state budget and folded it into the state's new Pupil-Centered Funding Formula. The class-size reduction mandates, however, remain in effect.

Key Points

Research on the national level shows that class-size reduction is not a cost-effective means for improving student performance. A growing library of empirical evidence indicates that, while reduced class sizes are associated with slight improvements in student performance, far more cost-effective approaches are available. Education scholars from across the political spectrum now agree that students would be better served by using education dollars in ways other than class-size reduction. As scholars from the left-leaning Center for American Progress, for instance, write:

Large-scale CSR policies clearly fail any cost-benefit test because they entail steep costs and produce benefits that are modest at best. There are certainly many policies that might be proposed as cost-effective alternatives to CSR, but one set of policies that stand out are those aimed at improving teacher quality. Researchers agree that teacher quality is the single most important in-school determinant of how much students learn ... Investing less in CSR would free up resources that could be used to recruit and retain highly effective teachers.¹

In Nevada, students in larger classes have outperformed students in smaller classes. Regardless of the observed national trend, Nevada's students in class sizes of one to 15 have dramatically underperformed their peers in larger class sizes on both reading and math tests.²

Class-size reduction dilutes teacher quality. The program's architects believed that smaller class sizes would increase the level of attention given by a teacher to each student – yielding higher achievement. The failure of the program to achieve this objective most likely has to do with the well-documented fact that no variable bears a greater relationship to student achievement than teacher quality. Yet, standout teachers – like standout surgeons and engineers – are necessarily in limited supply. Empirical evidence shows that hiring more teachers to fill additional classrooms only increases the likelihood that a student will receive a less-effective teacher and that this is a key reason behind the relative failure of class-size reduction.³

Class-size reduction funds could be used more productively elsewhere. Whatever the reasons for the program's failure, one truth is clear: Every dollar that lawmakers commit to class-size reduction is a dollar that cannot be spent elsewhere.

¹ Mathew M. Chingos, "The False Promise of Class-Size Reduction," Center for American Progress, April 2011.

² Legislative Counsel Bureau, Senate Human Resources Committee, "Background Paper 01-2: Nevada's Class-Size Reduction Program: Program Data and Summary of Evaluation Reports," 2001

³ Christopher Jepsen and Steven Rivkin, "Class Size Reduction and Student Achievement: The Potential Tradeoff between Teacher Quality and Class Size," *Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2009) pp. 223-250

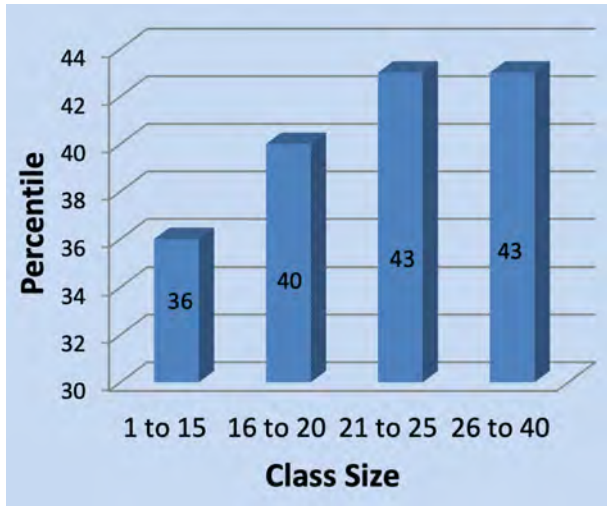
Recommendations

Eliminate class-size mandates. Policymakers who genuinely care about the quality of education available to Nevada’s children should want to see whatever limited education resources are available spent in the most cost-effective manner. Today broad agreement exists among education scholars that class-size reduction is among the least cost-effective means of increasing student achievement.

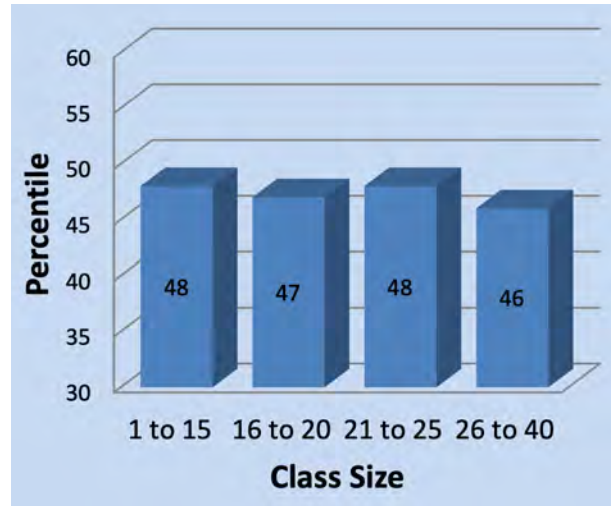
Policymakers should divert funding currently devoted to class-size reduction toward other education programs that offer a greater return on investment, such as an aggressive program of teacher merit pay. Following the elimination of class-size reduction as a categorical spending item in 2021, lawmakers only need to remove the mandates in NRS 388.700 and allow school districts to determine how best to allocate resources.

Results of First Evaluation Report of Class-Size Reduction Program*

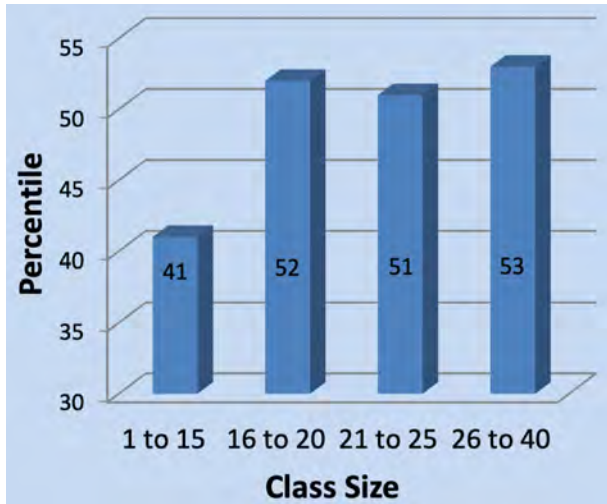
Reading, average percentile score for Washore and rural counties (second grade)



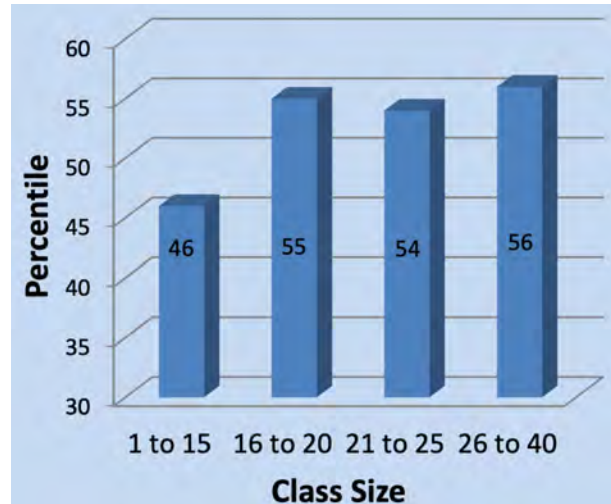
Math, average percentile score for Washore and rural counties (second grade)



Reading, average percentile score for Clark County (second grade)



Math, average percentile score for Clark County (second grade)



* Following the first evaluation report, the methodology was changed to cast the results more favorably.

Source: Nevada Legislature, Legislative Counsel Bureau, Background Paper O1-2.