

CLASS SIZE MATTERS

www.classsizematters.org

Here are seven myths about Class Size Reduction (CSR), juxtaposed with the facts.

**Myth #1:
Class size is an unproven or ineffective reform**

FACT: [Studies](#) from Tennessee, Wisconsin, and other states throughout the country demonstrate that students assigned to smaller classes in K-3 do better in every measurable way: They score higher on tests, receive better grades, and exhibit improved attendance and behavior.¹

- The Institute of Education Sciences, research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, cites class size reduction as [one of only four](#), evidence-based reforms proven to increase student achievement through rigorous, randomized experiments -- the "gold standard" of research.²
- The Tennessee [STAR experiment](#), a study designed to determine the effects of smaller class sizes on pupil performance, revealed that students placed in smaller classes in the early grades had higher earnings in adulthood, and greater likelihoods of attending college and having a 40K retirement plan as an adult.³

**Myth #2:
A threshold has to be reached before class size reduction works**

FACT: [Researchers](#) have found that there is no particular threshold that must be reached before students receive benefits from smaller classes, and any reduction in class size increases the probability that students will be on-task and positively engaged in learning.⁴

In fact, the eminent economist [Alan Krueger](#) of Princeton University analyzed the STAR results for students who were in the "larger" classes and found that within this range (22-25), the smaller the class, the better the outcome.⁵

**Myth #3:
Large scale trial programs, such as CSRP in California, didn't work.**

FACT: [Every controlled study](#) of the California class size reduction program has shown significant gains resulting from smaller classes.⁶

- Unlike STAR, in the California program nearly all the state's elementary schools reduced class size at once, so there were few comparable control groups to examine student outcomes. Additionally, the state exam was new, which increased the difficulty of comparing achievement gains to past trends.
- Yet, when analyzing the achievement of students who had a smaller class for only one year, compared to those in larger classes, the results were substantial, especially for disadvantaged students in inner-city schools. Researchers Michael Gilraine and [Fatih Unlu](#) analyzed the change in achievement, and by several different statistical methods, found very substantial gains from smaller classes, on the same order as the STAR studies.⁷

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¹ See "smaller classes, higher achievement and narrowing the opportunity gap": <<http://www.classsizematters.org/research-and-links/>>
² <<http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/rigorousvid/rigorousvid.pdf>>
³ <http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/finn_2002.pdf>
⁴ <<http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Examining-the-effect-of-class-size-on-classroom-engagement-and-Teacher-pupil-interaction-Differences-in-relation-to-pupil-prior-attainment-and-primary-vs.-secondary-schools.pdf>>
⁵ <http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Krueger_achievement_gap.pdf>
⁶ <http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/The_evidence_from_California-2012.pdf>
⁷ <http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/California_CSR_Fatih_Unlu.pdf> & <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.31/3zn.338.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Gilraine-et-al-Education-reform-in-general-equilibrium-evidence-from-CA-class-size-reduction.pdf>

7 Myths of Class Size Reduction

-----*And the truth!*

**Myth #4:
CSR lowers
the quality of
teachers**

FACT: [Research](#) has shown that when class sizes are lowered, teacher turnover rates fall.¹ This acts synergistically to enhance teacher quality, as lower rates of attrition increase the experience level and overall effectiveness of the teaching force.

- In California, when class sizes were reduced, rather than causing teachers to flee to higher performing districts as originally feared, follow-up [studies](#) showed that after a temporary rise, teacher migration rates declined to much lower levels than before, and most sharply in schools with large numbers of poor students.² For the first time, teacher migration rates converged in all schools, rich and poor.

**Myth # 5:
Class size
matters, but
only in the
early grades**

FACT: Although there has been no large scale experiment done for the middle and upper grades, as has been done in the early grades, numerous [reports](#) suggest that smaller classes lead to achievement gains and/or lower dropout rates in the middle and upper grades as well.³

- One [large scale analysis](#) found the only objective factor positively correlated with student performance was smaller classes. Moreover, student achievement was even more strongly linked to class size reduction in the upper grades than the lower grades.⁴

**Myth #6:
Other reforms
work better
to narrow the
opportunity
gap**

FACT: Though corporate-style reformers argue for more high-stakes tests, the elimination of teacher tenure, expansion of charter schools and online learning, there is no evidence that these methods will lead to more learning or narrow the opportunity gap.

Instead, researchers like [David Grissmer](#) of RAND and [Paul Barton of the ETS](#) argue that the reductions in class size of the 1970s & 80s could account for much of the test score gains among poor and minority students that took place over this period.⁵

**Myth #7:
Class Size
Reduction is
too expensive**

FACT: [Many studies](#) have shown that CSR is cost-effective because the gains in achievement would be expected to result in higher wages later in life. [Krueger](#) of Princeton has estimated the economic benefits outweigh the costs, two to one.⁶

- [Public health experts argue](#) that reducing class sizes may be more cost-effective than almost any other medical intervention, with large savings in health care and almost two years of additional life for those students who were in smaller classes in the early grades.⁷
- Some school leaders have reduced class size without spending more money, by redeploying out-of-classroom staff. [This article](#), for example, demonstrates how a middle school in New Jersey lowered student failure rates from 6% to only 1% by reducing class size, at little cost.⁸
- Finland spends less per student than the US but has [smaller classes](#), which is one of the keys to their students' success; showing that it's a matter of priorities not spending.⁹
- Finally, even if reducing class size is costly, the question is compared, to what? As Derek Bok, former president of Harvard, once said, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."



Class Size Matters is a 501 (c)3 non-profit

¹ Technical Appendix of the Capstone Report, 2002, CSR Research Consortium, see esp. figure C20, on C-29, <http://www.classize.org/techreport/CSRYear4_appxfin.pdf>; Emily Pas Isenberg, "The Effect of Class Size on Teacher Attrition: Evidence From Class Size Reduction Policies in New York State," U.S. Bureau of the Census, February 2010. <<http://www2.census.gov/ces/wp/2010/CES-WP-10-05.pdf>>

² <http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/CSRYear4_appxfin1.pdf>

³ <<http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/fact-sheet-on-upper-grades.pdf>>

⁴ <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000303.pdf>>

⁵ <<http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/MR924.pdf>> and <<http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PICBWWGAP.pdf>>

⁶ See *long-term effects, health and economic benefits*: <<http://www.classsizematters.org/research-and-links/>> and <<http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/economic-considerations-and-class-size.pdf>>

⁷ <http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Muennig_on_CSR_in_AJPH_20061.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Spring2006_FINAL.pdf>

⁹ <<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/politics/82329/education-reform-Finland-US#>>; <[http://www.hechingerreport.org/content/an-interview-with-henna-virkkunen-finlands-minister-of-education-5458/>](http://hechingerreport.org/content/an-interview-with-henna-virkkunen-finlands-minister-of-education-5458/>); <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/leonie-haimson/post_1650_b_816043.html>