

Research Briefs

Title

Class Size and Composition Matter

Background

Research clearly shows that smaller class sizes allow for higher levels of student engagement, increased time with the curriculum, and more opportunities for teachers to focus on the individual needs and interests of students in the classroom. The large body of research on class size shows that it is indeed “an important determinant of student outcomes” (Schanzenbach 2014), ranging from test scores to broader life outcomes.

In 2003, Alberta’s Commission on Learning (ACOL) made significant policy recommendations regarding class size: K–3 classes should, on average, have 17 students or fewer; Grades 4–6 classes should have 23 students or fewer; Grades 7–9 classes should have 25 students or fewer; and high school classes should have 27 students or fewer.

Alberta class size data from 2018, released by Alberta Education, show that the education system in Alberta has failed to achieve those targets. In Alberta in 2017/18, 80.39 per cent of Division I (K–3) classes were larger than their ACOL targets. On average, Division I classes were 29.41 per cent over their target, with the effects especially pronounced in large urban boards.

Four key recommendations have emerged from a comprehensive review of major class size research by Diane Schanzenbach (2014):

- Class size is an important determinant of student outcomes, and one that can be directly determined by policy. All else being equal, increasing class sizes will harm student outcomes.
- The evidence suggests that increasing class size will harm not only children’s test scores in the short run, but also their long-run human capital formation. Money saved today by increasing class sizes will result in more substantial social and educational costs in the future.

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- The payoff from class-size reduction is greater for low-income and minority children, while any increases in class size will likely be most harmful to these populations.
- Policymakers should carefully weigh the efficacy of class-size policy against other potential uses of funds. While lower class size has a demonstrable cost, it may prove the more cost-effective policy overall.

Key strategic considerations

- Class size is an important determinant of a variety of outcomes for students, including academic achievement, graduation rates, noncognitive abilities and broader life outcomes.
- Smaller classes support the development of interpersonal relationships and are a particularly useful strategy to support students who have socioeconomically based achievement gaps or those who come from minority backgrounds.
- Smaller class sizes, along with relevant supports for inclusive learning environments, support the development of optimal working conditions for teachers, thus encouraging teacher retention and reducing attrition rates.

Sources and further reading

Alberta's Commission on Learning (ACOL). 2003. *Every Child Learns, Every Child Succeeds: Report and Recommendations*. Edmonton, Alta: ACOL. Also available at <https://education.alberta.ca/media/1626474/commissionreport.pdf> (accessed November 2, 2018).

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Website

Class Size Averages by School Year, Jurisdiction, and Grade, Alberta

<https://open.alberta.ca/opendata/class-size-averages-by-school-year-jurisdiction-and-grade-alberta/>

