



K-12 Class Size in Washington State

Research Background

The issue of K-12 class size has continued to be a hotly debated topic in education policy discussions. However, very little of the debate has centered on the general effectiveness of class size interventions. Taken as a whole, the research literature has confirmed a variety of benefits of smaller class sizes, especially in student achievement for students in the primary grades and for low-income students and students of color¹. The consensus of the research is very strong for impacts in kindergarten through third grade but less so about positive effects in higher grades. The tension over class size exists less because of the empirical findings and more due to the cost of implementation.

A 2007 meta-data analysis of the rigorous research literature on the topic by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) for the Basic Education Finance Task Force found that class size reductions boost test scores in the primary grades but have little effect in middle and high school². Specifically, the class size reductions in kindergarten through second grade were estimated to produce a 6 to 11 percent annual real rate of return on investment. WSIPP also estimated a cost of \$220 per student per year for each unit drop in class size³.

Context in Washington State

Washington's statutory school funding formula specifies a higher funding level for the kindergarten through fourth grades, commonly known as the K-4 enhancement, for the purposes of lowering class size in these early grades. During the 2010 legislative session, the Legislature reduced the enhancement for the fourth grade but left enhancement for the K-3 grades intact⁴. The enhancement is in the form of a higher minimum level of certified instructional staff (CIS) per 1,000 full-time equivalent students (FTEs).

Two pieces of legislation enacted in 2009 and 2010 revised the definition of basic education and set out a new distribution method for school funding to begin in the 2011-12 school year. The new method, known as the prototypical school funding formula, sets out average class sizes by grade level instead of following the previous CIS/FTE ratio apportionment model. The initial average class sizes in the new funding model are⁵:

¹Ready, D.D. (2008). Class-size reduction policy, politics and implications for equity. Equity Matters, research review 2: http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/6863_Ready_Class_Size_Research_Review.pdf

² S. Aos, M. Miller, & J. Mayfield. (2007). Benefits and costs of K-12 educational policies: Evidence-based effects of class size reductions and full-day kindergarten. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 07-03-2201, Exhibit

³ WSIPP presentation to Senate Early Learning and K-12 Committee (July 2007): http://www.leg.wa.gov/Senate/Committees/EDU/Documents/BensCosts_EdPolicies.pdf

⁴ HB 6444 (2010) <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/documents/billdocs/2009-10/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Law%202010/6444-S.SL.pdf>

⁵ HB 2776 (2010) Final House Bill Report: <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/documents/billdocs/2009-10/Pdf/Bill%20Reports/House%20Final/2776-S%20HBR%20FBR%202010.pdf>



- Grades K-3: 25.23
- Grade 4: 27.00
- Grades 5:-6 27.00
- Grades 7-8: 28.53
- Grades 9-12: 28.74
- Middle and high school CTE: 26.57
- Skill center programs: 22.76

The prototypical schools funding formula also contains a phased enhancement for class sizes in the early grades. Between the 2011-2018 school years, the average class size in kindergarten through fourth grades must be reduced from 25.23 to 17 students per classroom teacher, beginning in the schools with the highest percentage of low-income students.

In December 2010, Governor Gregoire called a special session of the Legislature to address a \$1.1 billion state budget gap in the remainder of Fiscal Year 2011. During that one-day special session, which only partially dealt with the gap, the Legislature eliminated the K-4 enhancement for the remainder of the 2010-11 school year⁶. Subsequently, the governor released a supplemental budget proposal to deal with the remainder of the shortfall. The governor's proposal would retroactively eliminate the majority of funding for the K-4 enhancement for the whole of the 2010-2011 school year⁷. Under this scenario, districts would still see a small enhancement for the K-3 grades but none for the fourth grade.

Further, Governor Gregoire's proposal for the biennial 2011-13 budget does not include any enhancement for the early grades other than the smaller class sizes specified in the prototypical schools funding formula. The budget proposal contains no additional funding to begin the phased decrease to average class sizes of 17 in the K-3 grades.

It is unlikely that reductions in state funding for the K-4 enhancement will significantly alter class sizes during the current school year because school districts set staffing and class size decisions at the beginning of the school year through union contract negotiations. Thus, school districts will have to find other sources of funds (local, federal, or reserves) to cover the cost of having lower class sizes in the early grades.

⁶ HB 3225 (2010) http://leap.leg.wa.gov/leap/budget/lbns%5C2010_3225.SL.pdf, p. 116

⁷ Governor's Supplemental 2011 Operating Budget Proposal: http://www.ofm.wa.gov/budget11/bills/operating_11_supplemental.pdf, p. 152