

The Balanced View:

Research Update

Summary of new research on Balanced View topics

Fall 2002-03

Class Size

In 1996, California launched an ambitious class size reduction (CSR) initiative aimed at reducing class sizes in grades K-3 to 20 students or fewer. Encouraged by the success of the Tennessee STAR program (see *Balanced View*, May 1999), state policymakers expected CSR to lead to large gains in student achievement. Now, six years into the reform—by far the largest class size reduction effort in any state—a recently released final report provides some important insights about program outcomes. Key findings are summarized below according to six areas of study.

Rate of Implementation. CSR was fully implemented in grades one and two by the end of the second year. For kindergarten and 3rd grade, full implementation was reached by the fourth year. Implementation was slower, however, for urban schools serving higher percentages of poor and minority students, in part because these schools had difficulty acquiring needed space to expand classrooms.

Achievement. Student achievement increased steadily during CSR implementation, but the researchers could not attribute the gains to CSR. This was because they found no association between the amount of CSR exposure and the size of the gains—i.e., students with more exposure did not outperform those with less exposure. Furthermore, many other educational reforms were enacted during the CSR period that could have contributed to the achievement gains; the researchers could not isolate the unique effects of CSR.

Teacher Characteristics. CSR was associated with declines in teacher qualifications and a more inequitable distribution of credentialed teachers. Most of the uncredentialed teachers were hired by schools serving the most disadvantaged students.

Teaching Practices. CSR implementation enabled teachers to provide more individualized instruction to students. But apart from that, having a smaller class neither prompted teachers to radically alter their teaching practices nor change the breadth and depth of curriculum coverage.

Parent Satisfaction. CSR was widely popular with program parents. CSR parents reported higher levels of satisfaction with the overall quality of their child's education; access to computers, books, and other resources; classroom discipline; and the amount of individual attention given to their child than parents of children in regular classes.

Resource Allocation. Most districts incurred operating costs for CSR that exceeded state payments for it. To compensate, many cut back on classroom space and dollars allocated to other programs such as music and arts, athletics, and child care programs.

The CSR program is likely to remain a top priority in California because of its popularity with parents and teachers. To increase its effectiveness, the researchers offered a series of targeted recommendations. The recommendations and the full report can be found on the Web at: <http://www.classize.org/techreport/index-02.htm>