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INFOBRIEF

AN INFORMATION BRIEF OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR SUPERVISION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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When Politics Meet Practice

by Erik W. Robelen

Efforts to shrink class size in the early grades are winning increased support from policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels. President Clinton unveiled a $12 billion proposal this year that would help schools cut class size by hiring 100,000 new teachers. California is now spending more than $1 billion annually to reduce K-3 class sizes by one-third. Indiana, Michigan, Nevada, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, and Wisconsin are among a growing list of other states pursuing policies to lower the number of students per classroom.

Advocates of smaller classes cite a host of benefits: increased student achievement, fewer discipline referrals, more personalized attention to students, higher teacher morale, and more time for teachers to focus on instruction rather than on classroom management. They point to research, especially a well-known class-size experiment in Tennessee, to back their claims for the advantages of smaller classes.

Skeptics, on the other hand, argue that there is not enough evidence to merit the sizable investment needed to cut class size on a broad scale. In fact, they caution that trimming class size–which requires more teachers and more space–is one of the most expensive education reforms, and suggest that other reform measures may hold more promise at less cost.

National polls, media reports, and surveys in local school districts reflect strong backing for class-size reduction (CSR) among educators and the general public. In one example, an *NBC News/Wall Street Journal* poll conducted in March 1997 found that 70 percent of the public believes smaller classes would improve the nation's public schools ("What's Wrong—and Right—With Our Schools" 1997).

Politicians have been quick to capitalize on the issue. Some observers say the president's call for 100,000 new teachers has political echoes of an earlier Clinton plan to put 100,000 new police officers on the beat. More than 100 California lawmakers have promoted their votes on class size in campaign literature (Bell 1998). CSR is an easy political sell. It makes sense to the public and is much easier to quantify than, say, efforts to improve teacher quality and classroom instruction.

As policymakers grapple with class size, they must confront difficult questions:

- Given funding limitations, is reducing class size the best method to improve education?
- What approaches to class-size reduction are likely to prove most effective? What factors might enhance the effectiveness of smaller classes?
- How can policymakers handle some of the challenges of lowering class size, such as ensuring a qualified teacher pool and managing classroom space shortages?
- What impact does class-size reduction policy have on equity in education?

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August 24, 1998

Mr. Mike Cohen
Special Advisor to the President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. Cohen:

President Clinton's ambitious proposal to reduce class size has helped generate increasing interest in this issue. Significant class-size reduction efforts are already underway at the state level.

The enclosed publication, "Reducing Class Size," seeks to offer an in-depth, balanced look at this important topic, focusing on a number of key questions: 1) What does the research say about class size? 2) What are the implementation challenges of lowering class size? 3) Is class-size reduction the best use of limited education dollars? and 4) What can educators and policymakers do to maximize the benefits of smaller classes? I also offer a snapshot of what is happening in a number of states that have developed class-size legislation. I am hopeful that this policy brief will contribute to, and perhaps expand, the dialogue on class-size reduction.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is a diverse, nonpartisan education organization. Our members include teachers, principals, supervisors, superintendents, school board members, professors of education, parents, and students. ASCD is committed to ensuring a quality education for all learners.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to call me at (703) 575-5609 or send an e-mail to <erobelen@ascd.org>.

Sincerely,

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