

Policy from the Hip: Class-Size Reduction in California

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In the spring of 1996, California Governor Pete Wilson pushed through the state legislature a class-size-reduction plan limiting to twenty students all classes in kindergarten through the third grade in a state where many had thirty or more students. With one significant exception, there was little research to support such a sweeping plan, a point Wilson himself made when he opposed class-size reduction earlier in his administration. But Wilson, faced with a constitutional requirement to put a large part of the state's new revenues into the schools and wanting to keep the money off the union bargaining table, prevailed despite the warnings of skeptics to go slow.

Class-size reduction went into effect almost overnight, requiring the hiring of thousands of often underqualified teachers, squeezing classroom space, and costing the state (at present) about \$1.7 billion a year, but meeting with great support from both teachers and parents. How much difference has smaller class size made in raising academic achievement? As the only major study of California's program observed, because so many other reforms were being instituted at the same time, "it is impossible to attribute changes in achievement to any single cause."

This paper covers the politics leading up to the California program, reviews the research, discusses the lack of positive cost-effectiveness studies, and raises broader questions about the nation's ability to separate political considerations, including widespread public support, from effective educational policymaking.