

The Relative Influence of Research on Class-Size Policy

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Since the early 1990s, a number of state legislatures and local school boards have funded class-size reduction policies in order to improve student achievement in the early elementary grades. The recent proliferation of such policies provides an opportunity to understand how state and district lawmakers have used research in formulating policy. This paper examines the influence of research on class-size policy in three sections, organized chronologically. First, it reviews empirical research on the relationship between class size and student achievement from the 1960s to 1980s. Second, it describes the role that research played in shaping class-size policies in Tennessee and Indiana in 1989 and in Wisconsin and California in 1996. Each pair of case studies illustrates substantial differences in the way that state legislators framed the class-size debate and used research in determining the scope and size of their policies. Third, it discusses several lessons bearing on the relationship between research and policy as applied to class size in particular and education reform in general.

The basic conclusion of this paper is that research has most directly influenced class-size policies that are limited to high-poverty schools and reserved primarily for minority students during the first year of formal schooling. Because the perceived benefits of targeted class-size policies are not distributed among a large number of individuals and interest groups, such policies do not automatically command a wide base of political support. Instead, they must rely on alternative forms of support, such as empirical evidence that demonstrates efficacy or reinforces normative claims about the value of improving the achievement of minority and low-income children. The case studies suggest that targeted class-size reduction is both scientifically defensible and politically feasible.