Schools Learn Expensive Lesson on Class Size

Many states spent billions to shrink student-teacher ratios but now seek cheaper ways to improve performance

Kindergarten students get to know each other at Westside Elementary on the first day of school for Hernando County, Fla. on Aug. 10. *PHOTO: BRENDAN FITTERER/TAMPA BAY TIMES/ZUMA PRESS*

By **JO CRAVEN MCGINTY,** Sept. 30, 2016 10:28 a.m. ET
62 COMMENTS

A generation ago, a landmark experiment conducted in Tennessee found that shrinking the number of children in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms led to improved test scores.

You can guess what happened next.

Like a playground stampede to a new teeter totter, parents, teachers and elected officials began clamoring to reduce class sizes.

California limited classes to 20 students in kindergarten through third grade. Wisconsin set the student-teacher ratio in low-income schools at 15 to 1 through third grade. Florida amended its constitution to cap the number of students in all grades at 18 to 25, depending on grade level.

Over the years, at least half the states have used mandates or incentives to reduce class sizes, but the reductions are one of the most expensive interventions in education, and lately, some places are backing off the limits.

Wisconsin, for example, is ending its program after two decades to give schools more flexibility in deciding how to improve achievement.

California, which has spent at least $20 billion since 1996 to reduce class sizes, has loosened its restrictions and now has some of themost crowded classrooms in the country with 22.5 pupils per teacher, according to the National Education Association, which notes that K-3 classrooms typically have nine or 10 more students than the student-teacher ratio.

Florida has spent more than $30 billion since 2003 to reduce class sizes, but state lawmakers have repeatedly looked for ways to ease the requirement.

Some argue there are better ways to boost achievement than taking on the expense of hiring more teachers to staff additional classrooms.

“Small classes do provide modest benefits to the students with respect to academic achievement,” said Martin West, an associate professor of education at Harvard, “but the benefits are less strong than being assigned to a particularly effective teacher.”

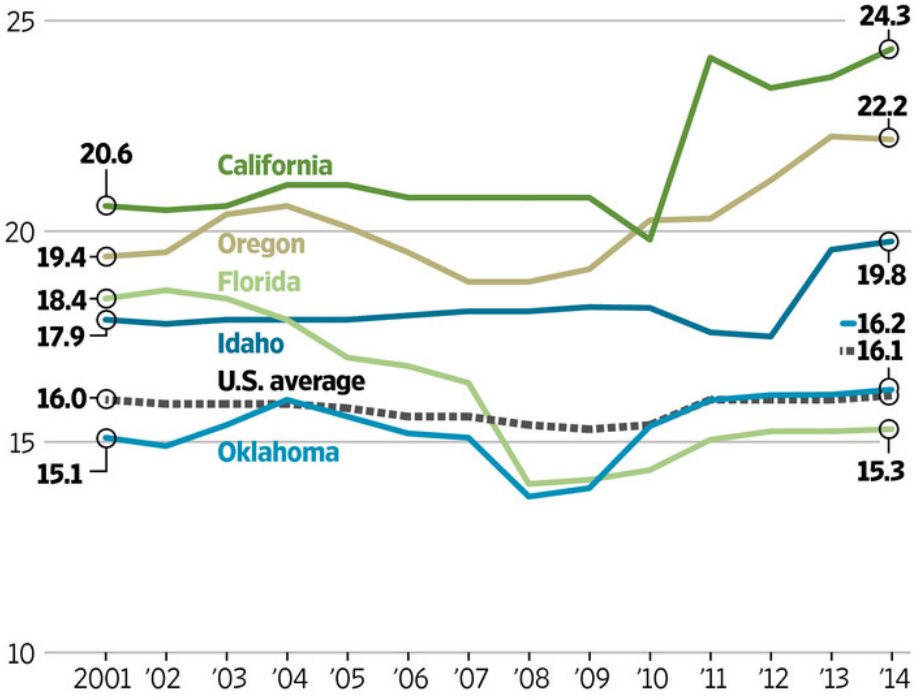
The Tennessee experiment that documented the benefits of small class sizes randomly assigned students and teachers to classes with an average of either 15 or 22 students, according to Matthew Chingos,a senior fellow at the Urban Institute who studies education.

Four years later, children assigned to the smaller classes had absorbed the equivalent of about three additional months of learning. In addition, long-range follow-up studies found those assigned to the smaller classes were two percentage points more likely to attend college, with poor and minority students benefiting the most.

Student Ratio Rebound

Research has shown that smaller class sizes improve academic achievement, but lately the numbers have been creeping up.

Pupil-teacher ratio for select states, by school year



Source: National Center for Education Statistics THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. ENLARGE

Other states that reduced class sizes often tweaked the design of Tennessee’s study—the only large-scale randomized evaluation of class size—and in the absence of scientific controls, it’s difficult to document the effectiveness of the different approaches.

“If you just look at data and see some classes are bigger or smaller and some kids have higher or lower test scores, there is no way to say what is the effect without a random change in class size,” Mr. Chingos said.

When California reduced its class sizes, children received more individual attention and were less disruptive, but a review conducted by a research consortium whose work was funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education didn’t find a strong relationship between achievement and the reduction in class size, and there were other unintended consequences.

“California implemented its program almost overnight,” saidDominic Brewer, dean of New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, who followed the reduction. “It created a dramatic increase in the demand for teachers.”

Inexperienced or in some cases uncertified teachers were hired to staff new classrooms, and with so many additional jobs to fill, wealthier districts were able to lure better teachers away from poorer districts.

Space also became an issue.

“You did end up with kids in small classes,” Dr. Brewer said, “but often they were in a trailer and not necessarily with a quality teacher.”

There is no formula to determine optimal class size, the experts said, and the number may vary from school to school, but shifting the level up or down can dramatically affect costs.

The Brookings Institution has estimated that increasing the student-teacher ratio in the U.S. by one would save at least $12 billion per year in teacher salaries, money that could be spent on professional development for teachers or other interventions aimed at improving student achievement.

“The question for educators and policymakers is how to trade off the cost of hiring more teachers vs. the benefits of having smaller classes,” Mr. Chingos said. “To pay for it, you may end up spending less on art or music, or you may pay teachers less and get worse teachers. As parents, would you rather have a couple fewer kids in your child’s class, or would you like to pick the best teacher in the grade for your child?”

It’s seems like an elementary question. But arriving at the right answer requires some advanced calculations.

Write to Jo Craven McGinty at Jo.McGinty@wsj.com

http://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-learn-expensive-lesson-on-class-size-1475245698?tesla=y