

.....

CLASS AND SCHOOL SIZE

.....

.....

The Elixir of Class Size

.....

Chester E. Finn, Jr.
Michael J. Petrilli

This selection first appeared in the *Weekly Standard* on 9 March 1998; copyright News America Incorporated. Chester E. Finn, Jr. is the John M. Olin Fellow at the Hudson Institute and president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Michael J. Petrilli is a researcher at the Hudson Institute and is certified in Michigan to teach social studies.

The president has proposed to shrink class sizes in the early grades by hiring 100,000 more teachers at federal expense. This is quintessential Clintonism—a warm Labrador puppy of a policy notion, petted by teachers and parents alike, but destined to bite when it grows up.

There is precious little evidence that smaller classes help students—achievement may even go down if the new teachers are mediocre—but don't try telling this to voters. Smaller classes are a pollster's delight. The idea is so popular that many states and communities have jumped the gun. Indiana shrank its primary classes more than a decade ago. California's Pete Wilson was hailed when he said the state's surplus should be used for this purpose. Class-size reduction was part of the successful campaign platform of Virginia's new Republican governor, Jim Gilmore, who has promised 4,000 new teachers in the state over the course of his four-year term. Similar proposals await legislative action in Alabama, Delaware, New York, and many other jurisdictions.

Why this lemming-like rush off the class-size cliff? "Teachers are thrilled, parents are thrilled," explained a California elementary school principal in response to the president's plan. Parents simply take for

granted that smaller classes mean better education. Teachers cheer because their jobs get easier with fewer students per classroom. Unions get more members. Administrators get more staff. And most local school boards welcome any move by Uncle Sam to pay teacher salaries.

Congress will therefore likely end up saying yes. But it shouldn't. The administration's plan—and others like it—is bad for at least five reasons.

First, the conventional wisdom that students do better in smaller classes is flat wrong. After surveying all the relevant research, economist Eric Hanushek of the University of Rochester concludes that “there is little systematic gain from general reduction in class size.” Besides, classes have been shrinking for decades—today's national average of 22 kids per classroom is down from 30-plus in the 1950s—with no commensurate gains in learning, although the cost has been immense. (No “reform” is more expensive than smaller classes.) The Asian lands that trounce us on international assessments have vastly larger classes, often 40 or 50 youngsters per teacher. Yes, there are one or two studies indicating that fewer *kindergarten* children in a classroom is linked with modest test-score gains. But put it this way: If smaller classes were a drug, the FDA would not let it onto the market. Additional experiments might be warranted, but no scientist would say that its efficacy has been proven.

There's a simple reason why small classes rarely learn more than big ones: Their teachers don't do anything differently. The same lessons, textbooks, and instructional methods are typically employed with 18 or 20 children as with 25 or 30. It's just that the teacher has fewer papers to grade and fewer parents to confer with. Getting any real achievement bounce from class shrinking hinges on teachers who know their stuff and use proven methods of instruction. Of course, knowledgeable and highly effective teachers would also fare well with classes of 30 or 35. Jaime Escalante, renowned as the “best teacher in America,” packs his classroom every year with 30-plus “disadvantaged” teenagers and consistently produces scholars who pass the tough Advanced Placement calculus exam. But such teaching is not the norm in U.S. schools, and adding teachers to the rolls won't cause it to be. (Indeed, a federal program hell-bent on raising achievement would probably do better by firing rather than hiring 100,000 teachers. Students would be in larger classes but with better teachers, who could be paid more with the salary moneys freed up by the layoffs.)

Second, those 12 billion new dollars (over seven years) would likely do more good if spent in other—politically riskier—ways. \$1.7 billion

a year would, for example, furnish \$4,000 scholarships to 425,000 low-income children to escape from grim urban schools into private or charter (or suburban public) schools. That's equivalent to liberating every boy and girl in Washington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia from the educational carnage that now surrounds them. Alternatively, such sums would pay for *all* current U.S. teachers to take more university courses. The leading problem in many classrooms, after all, isn't the pupil body count. It's teachers who never mastered the content. The Education Department reports that 36 percent of public-school teachers of academic subjects neither majored nor minored in their main teaching field. To get them up to speed, the amount Clinton proposes to spend on class-size reduction would yield a \$4,500 tuition grant for every one of the nation's 2.7 million teachers.

Which brings us to the third flaw in his scheme. It's embedded in a larger "teacher improvement" package that has little to do with the quality of the current teaching force, will strengthen the ed-school and certification monopolies for future teachers, and will weaken halting state efforts to develop sound alternatives. The White House will, for example, require communities that want to participate in the class-reduction scheme to ensure that every person hired is (or soon will be) "fully certified."

At first glance, "certified teachers" looks like another warm puppy of a policy. Who could want anything else? Yet in practically every state, the only way to get certified today is to take lots of "methods" courses in colleges of education rather than immersing oneself in the subject to be taught. It's certification that blocks millions of able adults from teaching in public schools. (Charter and private schools are often free from these rules—and plenty of well-educated people queue up at their doors for every teaching job.) It's certification that keeps low-quality education schools in business.

Fourth, bringing 100,000 teachers onto direct federal support will create another permanent program, a virtual entitlement sure to grow over time. What happens in Year Eight, after Clinton's \$12 billion is spent? Easy. The program will be extended. Indeed, if 18 children per class is good, the next politician will claim that 16 must be better. If Uncle Sam is going to provide the country with smaller classes through third grade, why not through fourth, then fifth? The Clinton version is just a preview of coming attractions.

Finally, across-the-board class reductions can leave needy kids worse off. Take California, for example. When Pete Wilson shrank primary

classes throughout the state, veteran teachers left inner-city schools in droves, lured by the higher pay and cushier working conditions of suburban systems that suddenly had openings.

President Clinton is not the only politician now eyeing this path to voters' hearts. Congressmen and senators on both sides of the aisle are hastening to craft their own measures. They like teachers—and puppies—too. Most pending proposals (like the White House “teacher improvement” package) lift their ideas from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, a private group funded by the Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations and chaired by longtime North Carolina governor Jim Hunt. Its members include the heads of both national teachers' unions and a blue-ribbon list of ed-school professors, deans, and presidents. This crew contends that the central weakness in U.S. teacher training is that candidates don't spend enough time in “professional development programs,” that states lack “professional standards” boards, that certification requirements need to be strengthened, and that all teacher training programs should jump through the same “accreditation” hoops.

The commission's recommendations boil down to teachers' spending more time in ever-more-uniform education schools and barring the classroom door to everyone else. It's no surprise that the administration has bought this line. But why Congress?

If there's money burning to be spent, Congress should give it to states to underwrite novel approaches to the training, pay, and licensing of teachers. Cajole the states to break the ed-school hammerlock, loosen the certification stranglehold, and blaze alternative paths into teaching so that well-educated liberal arts graduates and experienced professionals can enter the classroom from many directions. States could also demand that every teacher—veteran and novice alike—master the subjects they are expected to teach—and hold them accountable for pupil achievement by scrapping tenure and substituting multi-year contracts that reward results and penalize failure.

Such suggestions lack the instant appeal of Clinton's new pooch. Unlike class-size reduction, which has no known enemies, serious attention to quality means attacking the school establishment's strongest redoubts: the unions, teacher colleges, state regulatory apparatuses, and interlocking special-interest groups. It's much easier just to call for more adult bodies in the classroom (and confine all “quality control” provisions to newcomers.) Schools won't improve. Kids won't learn more.

But the politicians will score points with the public—and with the unions. We understand why Bill Clinton needs such points nowadays. But his proposal is really a dog of an idea. Congress should shop at a different pet store.

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

William R. Capps and Mary Ellen Maxwell

This selection first appeared in *The American School Board Journal's* September 1999 issue. William R. Capps is an education professor at Troy State University in Dothan, Alabama. Mary Ellen Maxwell, a school board member in Moyock, North Carolina, is immediate past president of the National School Boards Association.

For months, the nation has attempted with little success to decipher the cultural forces that led to the tragic high school shooting in Littleton, Colo. The political, media, and psychological pundits notwithstanding, about the only self-evident truth that can be gleaned from our soul-searching is that we have elevated finger-pointing to a fine and expedient art.

There is one convincing body of research, however, that invites the attention of school board members and administrators as they ponder how best to respond to the repercussions of Littleton. That research addresses the issue of school size.

The American character has been shaped in many ways by the concept of bigness—the bigger, the better. We glorify wide-open spaces, the Big Sky, the Big Gulp, and the Super-Sized. We are fascinated with the big and powerful. But sadly, we have lost our attachment to the beauty of smallness—a loss that has had a profound effect on our nation's schools.

The move toward ever-larger schools has been going on through most of the 20th century. This trend was validated in the late 1950s when Harvard University President James B. Conant and other nationally recognized education leaders began to advocate the creation of consolidated, comprehensive high schools. The best feature of such schools, they believed, was that they could offer students a wider variety of academic