

Chalkboard's K-12 Action Plan

#10: REDUCE CLASS SIZES FOR K-1

Goal: Teach all children to read at grade level by lowering class sizes in K-1 classrooms.

Recommendation: Oregon must do a better job of teaching reading. To do this more effectively, we need smaller class sizes in kindergarten and first grade. Oregon Department of Education (ODE) should pilot a program to reduce K-1 class size, while also tailoring professional development to help teachers take full advantage of the lower class sizes to improve instruction.

Success Measurement: Oregon's 4th Grade Reading test scores (on the National Assessment of Education Progress tests) would be statistically indistinguishable from the top performing state. Currently, reports from the NAEP for reading show that in the most recent 4th grade reading assessment (2003), students in 19 states could claim higher average scores than Oregon students – 63% of 4th graders are at a basic or proficient level. Findings for the 8th grade reading exam found 12 states outperforming Oregon.

Concept: Oregon should target investments on any class size reductions on grades K-1 but permit flexibility to test other models in the early grades. Chalkboard's research suggests policies that focus on smaller K-1 class sizes will be the most likely to generate achievement gains. Moreover, within those grades, students from low-income families appear to benefit more than students from middle- and upper-income families. Therefore, a phased-in strategy could start small with schools in low-income areas and progress gradually to higher income areas as financial resources, facilities and the supply of qualified teachers, allow. Drawing from the Quality Education Model (QEM) recommendations, reducing only K-1 class sizes would cost about \$40 million per year, or 1 percent in addition to the state's baseline spending. The only true experiment ever conducted in class size reduction found that class sizes of 13 to 17 showed marked improvement over larger class sizes. It makes sense to test these lower levels at some schools, since the QEM recommends class sizes of 20, which is larger than the study's samples. Optimal class size is still an unknown; therefore policymakers should build flexibility and experimentation into their plans, and allow individual districts to explore best practices. The state would not require local districts to reduce class sizes.

Public Opinion: *In Chalkboard's recent focus groups with award-winning teachers and principals, participants frequently pointed to districts' large and increasing class sizes as a barrier to stronger student achievement. In response to Chalkboard's Citizen Feedback Guide survey, Oregonians gave "Minimize class size in all classrooms" a rating of 3.8 on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Chalkboard's statewide public opinion poll supports the emphasis on educational basics like reading. Ninety-three percent of Oregonians place a high or urgent priority on supporting reading, math and writing in Oregon's schools. Ninety-seven percent of those polled say strong skills in reading, writing and speaking English should be required or are very important for high school graduation.*

Supportive Research: Oregon's class sizes are among the highest in the nation—and they are on the rise. The State's Quality Education Model (QEM) calls for a number of reforms that would drive down class sizes at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Implemented as a package and aimed at elementary grades, QEM's class-size recommendations would increase K-12 spending by \$368 million at the 2005-06 school year budget levels, an 8.4 percent increase over the total budget (that is, federal, state and local resources).

Class-size reduction (CSR) strategies have been among the most common and hotly debated education reforms over the past several decades. Unlike complex curriculum or testing redesigns, it's easy to convey the purpose and possibilities of CSRs to parents and taxpayers. In a nutshell, the message is fewer students in the classroom allow teachers more one-on-one time with each student. From another perspective, the overall likelihood of classroom disruptions interrupting educational activity increases with class size if you consider that each student has an independent likelihood of disrupting a class on a given day. More students in a room, thus equals more potential disruptions.

The research community has not definitively accepted or rejected small classes as a cost-effective policy to improve student achievement. While Project STAR suggests that moving from 22 to 15 students in the K-3 grades yields achievement gains in Tennessee, the project offers no evidence on the effectiveness of moving from 30 to 25 students or from 25 to 20. They did no research on class size reductions in Grade 4 onward either. Oregon should also learn from California's class-size reduction mistake. California reduced class sizes throughout the state without leaving a comparison group (large class-size districts) with which to gauge the policy's effectiveness. Additionally, implementation was slower in schools serving low-income students, the population considered most likely to benefit from the policy. Still, among parents who completed a survey, CSR was popular with parents as their satisfaction with educational services correlated highly with class size.

The California experience provides valuable insight for considering CSR. Class sizes should be reduced gradually to

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preserve teacher quality (any achievement gains resulting from lower class sizes could be lost if teacher quality suffers). Similarly, facilities need to have reasonable capacity to absorb more classes. Oregon also needs to look at CSR's relationship to other complementary policies, such as teacher professional development and mentoring. Together, these might increase the likelihood of student success. On the other hand, competing policies, such as extended school days or school years, would increase the cost and compromise the benefits of class size reductions.

Chalkboard recognizes that research on class-size reduction is limited at best, and leaves many questions unanswered. Most notably, there are no studies on large class size and how growing class sizes impact student learning. Tennessee's Project STAR's look at decreasing class sizes from 22 to 15 is not, in the end, very relevant to Oregon's situation, where citizens are concerned about elementary class sizes of 30 or more, and secondary classes with 35 or more students.

Given the high costs and uncertain benefits, ODE must develop requirements for rigorous evaluation designs before funds are released to school districts. Useful evaluations that demonstrate a definitive link between class size reductions and educational outcomes are expensive and difficult to implement. Developing good evaluations will require districts to implement class size reductions more strategically, in isolation from other reforms so they can test the policy's effectiveness. The high cost of rigorous evaluations may also mean, in the short-term, that districts have to either divert some dollars from the classroom to research, or learn to work more collaboratively, sharing evaluation costs more broadly across districts. While the cost of rigorous evaluation in dollars and time is high, without it, Oregon will not have evidence that new investments in education lead to improvements in student learning. If this is the case, it will be difficult to demonstrate to Oregon taxpayers that the class size reductions were justified.

(Please visit the "Download Center" section of www.chalkboardproject.org to see source data: Citizen Public Opinion Statewide Poll: Highlights of Key Findings; Citizen Feedback Guide Survey Result; and ECONW Report: Condition of K-12 Education in Oregon, pp. iv to vi, 2-29 to 2-41; Improving Quality & Strengthening Accountability in Oregon's Schools: Full Report, Ch. 2, pp. 2-1 to 2-11.)