

# RESEARCH *in* BRIEF

## ONTARIO'S PRIMARY CLASS SIZE REDUCTION INITIATIVE: REPORT ON EARLY IMPLEMENTATION

Intuitively, smaller class sizes sound like a good idea. Parents and teachers generally believe that smaller groups of students allow for more individual attention and result in improved student achievement. A consensus has emerged in the research that reduced class size makes a small but useful improvement to achievement in the early grades. However, reducing class size is complex: it impacts how classroom space is used, how teachers are recruited and allocated, and how students are grouped. Class size reduction is not a “magic bullet;” it is costly and must be done in concert with improving teaching practices.

“The staff knew my child’s strengths and areas to improve and I think this was due in part to the smaller class size.”

– Ontario parent of primary-aged child, 2007-08

### SNAPSHOT

In the 2003–04 school year, 25 per cent of primary classes had more than 25 students; only 31 per cent of primary classes had 20 or fewer students. The government set an ambitious goal of phasing in, over four years, smaller class sizes in the primary grades. In 2008–09, the target was achieved on a province-wide basis: over 90 per cent of all primary classes had 20 or fewer students, and **all** primary classes had 23 or fewer students.

In 2007-08, through an agreement with the Ministry of Education, the Canadian Education Association contracted with a team of researchers from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education to identify early benefits and emerging challenges, and to provide recommendations that would increase the potential of the primary class size reduction to achieve provincial goals for high-quality education.



## METHODOLOGY

- review of international class size literature
- analysis of class size data collected annually by the Ontario Ministry of Education
- nested sampling: site visits to eight diverse school districts; three schools in each district and four classrooms per school
- interviews with administrators, principals, teachers
- all-school teacher survey in 24 schools and a province-wide parent survey

## KEY FINDINGS

Class size reduction did not occur in isolation. The government also devoted resources toward helping teachers develop skills in literacy and numeracy instruction and in meeting the needs of students in special education. The full gains of class size reduction cannot be achieved if it is implemented without paying attention to other factors that support improved results, including innovative teaching strategies and strong instructional leadership.

### ***Nearly universal compliance***

- There was successful implementation of primary class size in four years (almost exactly on target) – more than 90% of all primary classes have 20 or fewer students, and all primary classes have 23 or fewer students

### ***Mixed effects on boards***

- School boards implemented primary class size with a focus on allocating staff and facilities planning, rather than looking at how it could affect, or be affected by, existing instructional policies
- Boards with more resources were better able to manage the implementation of primary class size reduction without having to reduce human resources in other program areas
- Most boards saw an increase in the number of combined grade classes in the primary division

### ***Positive results for primary classrooms***

- Teachers reported that students were more engaged with their learning and that they could spend more time helping individual students; they also said classroom behaviour improved

### ***Principals central to the process***

- Teachers generally find it difficult to teach combined grade classes, so principals made staffing decisions based on short-term conflict management (rather than on longer-term concerns about teaching quality and experience)
- Principals tended to look at primary class size reduction as something to be complied with, rather than with an eye to innovation and policy coherence

## RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

### ***Address challenges:***

- Students with low socioeconomic status, as well as immigrants and English-as-a-second-language learners, tended to receive less instruction in higher-order skills, even though smaller class sizes help to make this teaching possible (i.e., stereotypes held regardless of class size)
- There was some evidence of reduced learning opportunities in junior and intermediate classes due to larger class sizes, combined grades, and a diversion of resources to primary classes.
- Loss of local flexibility and decision-making (primary class size reduction was mandated by the province)
- Few board and school leaders made clear links from primary class size reduction to teaching and learning, in deciding how to implement it

## WHAT IS ONTARIO DOING NOW TO SUPPORT THE PRIMARY CLASS SIZE REDUCTION INITIATIVE?

One of the ministry's priority goals is closing the achievement gap between groups of students. The ministry has developed a range of supporting strategies related to equity and the needs of specific student populations, including students with special needs, English-language learners, Aboriginal students, and those struggling for a variety of other reasons.

To take advantage of the reduction of class size, the ministry's Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat continues to work with schools and school boards to improve instruction at the classroom level.

The ministry continues to work with school boards to help them maintain the smaller primary class sizes they've achieved. The ministry is providing boards with annual funding for 5,100 additional primary teaching positions, as well as providing capital funding to support the construction of new primary classrooms. Classes in Grades 4-8 *are* larger than in the primary division, but in 2010-11, the ministry is providing money to reduce those class sizes.

Finally, the ministry provides teachers and parents with supports around combined grade classes (e.g., research-based tips for parents and differentiated instruction strategies for teachers).

## ABOUT THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR



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## LINKS

Ontario's Primary Class Size Reduction Initiative: Report on Early Implementation (Feb 2010) – Canadian Education Association  
[www.cea-ace.ca/sites/default/files/cea-2010-class-size-on.pdf](http://www.cea-ace.ca/sites/default/files/cea-2010-class-size-on.pdf)

Class size: Less is more (2001) – Manitoba Teachers' Society. Available at:  
[www.mbteach.org/library/Archives/Issues/ISS-classcomp.pdf](http://www.mbteach.org/library/Archives/Issues/ISS-classcomp.pdf)

What matters about class size? (Summer 2006) – Canadian Education Association (P. Milton). Available in *Education Canada* at  
[www.cea-ace.ca/sites/default/files/EdCan-2006-v46-n3-Milton-At-Issue.pdf](http://www.cea-ace.ca/sites/default/files/EdCan-2006-v46-n3-Milton-At-Issue.pdf)

Class Size Tracker – Ontario Ministry of Education  
[www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/cst/](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/cst/)

## KEYWORDS

*Primary class size;*  
*class size;*  
*combined grades;*  
*split grades*