

**Public School Education –  
The Case for Reduced Class Size**

**Why the Present Class Size is Not Working and What Can We Do about It ?**

Evol Graham  
Argosy University  
Department of Education

Publishing date: January 2009

## **Public School Education – The Case for Reduced Class Size**

### **Why the Present Class Size is Not Working and What Can We Do about It ?**

Reduced class size is a necessary strategy to close the achievement gap and address inequalities in public school education caused by years of neglect. “The Class-Size Reduction Program is a new initiative to hire additional, highly qualified teachers so that students can attend smaller classes in the crucial early grades and get a solid foundation for learning. A growing body of research demonstrates that students attending small classes in the early grades make more rapid educational progress than students in larger classes, and that these achievement gains persist well after students move on to larger classes in later grades.” (Promising Initiatives to Improve Education in Your Community; 2000) <sup>i</sup>

Class size is a relative factor. Traditionally, class size was 30 – 35 or even 40 students but those conditions assumed that all students were of equal background and all started at the same levels, with few or no disadvantages. The social political and economic environment has changed to such levels especially in urban centers that states must determine the relative optimum class to teacher ratio to establish designated class size ratio. This is determined by the diversity level of each community – the physically disabled, economically disadvantaged, and the culturally and religiously diverse population segments.

This paper traces the origins of the issues of Education that affect class size in the public school system in the United States of America. In order better to understand the present condition of overcrowded class size, lawmakers and administrators are introduced to a profile of the U.S. society and its neglect of the changing factors in public school education system. This paper also addresses the changing urban landscape due to its political, economic, cultural, religious, and social conditions. These are some reasons why reduced class size could improve achievement levels and close the education gap in public schools.

## **Where it all began**

Traditional classical curriculum is rooted in Western white European values and typifies what was considered to be American during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, educating a large population that is heterogeneous and divided by class, economics, ethnicity, culture and religion is a challenging undertaking for our democracy. At the beginning of this massive public education system, students placed in public schools were required to participate. Education, mandatory and compulsory, is a service under the control of the State everyone is given to have an equal opportunity to education

An equal opportunity is only possible if every child can receive the same level of attention in the classroom. In a culturally diverse class where children are beginning at different levels, it might not be possible unless class size is reduced to manageable levels. A reduced class size that is manageable is usually a mandate from the state that determines or sets objectives to close the existing achievement gap. <sup>ii</sup>

Reduced class size will be necessary as long as students come from desperate backgrounds and are not truly equal by cultural practices or acceptance in which they will not enjoy the benefits of a true USA democracy. There are some major failures in this history, most notably the lack of equal educational opportunities for African American, Native Americans, women, immigrants and those of the lower class". (Jack Nelson 2006)<sup>iii</sup>. Over time our education system has incorporated social welfare components to provide a more democratic and equitable system. Despite such efforts, education in the traditional sense failed. We may not realize these ambitions and our real intentions may be less altruistic (Katz 1968)<sup>iv</sup>.

The idea was to blend the new immigrants into the mainstream through compulsory education. Nineteenth century education was then focused on British American history and civics. "A history of racism, sexism, and ethnic prejudice was commonly ignored in American social life and schools, while we labored under the myth that everyone shared a happy society made up of people who should all talk, think, and form values the same

way. (Jack Nelson 2006)<sup>v</sup>. The school became the training ground to introduce the superiority of Western literature, history, politics and economics.

The philosophers of education during the 1930s and 1940s experienced unique classroom problems of their time which were at the heart of their discussions. While many of those debates continue today, the issue of diversity in the general population has shifted the core discussion - the need to reduce class size and customize teaching strategies.

Education on-Demand now fulfills the specific needs of new communities. In a reduced class size, teaching on demand reaches students according to their appropriate levels, capabilities and cultural maturity.

### **Political Process and Civil Rights have Changed Class Size**

The social atmosphere of the 1960s was one of resistance from those in power, who would not allow Blacks to vote. African Americans attended segregated schools and demonstrated publicly to integrate schools, and other social institutions and amenities of the time.

During the 1950s, schools housed a more homogeneous population. Class size ratio was 35 to 40 students per teacher. The population was predominantly European whites and that was the status quo. The 1964 Civil Rights Act was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson which caused politicians to resist or comply with busing of children to integrate schools.<sup>vi</sup> Choice was introduced as a political strategy. The children from impoverished, low income neighborhoods required assistance. The new school of thought during the 70s and 80s was faced with new political issues.

### **Democracy – a force for change**

Politics at all levels has been a transforming force for public education from the very beginning of the public school system. Federal, state, and local politicians have influenced or written laws on educational reforms aimed at improving the process. In response to the criticism of constituents, public school reforms have been the subject of much debate from various segments of our democratic spectrum. The United States democracy is truly a unique melting pot of diverse peoples, religions, cultures, ethnicity,

and political grouping. Each of these groups, with their own opinion, influences the political decision made about public schooling in the United States of America. There are very clear reasons to believe education might be the most controversial issue in U.S. society. Reforms were needed to provide equal opportunity for the disabled and disadvantaged. New programs included Class Size Reduction Program, PL94-142, IDEA, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Title 1 and accountability were implemented.

### **Is Class Size Reduction in alignment with philosophies on pedagogy?**

Mortimer J. Adler believes that minimum level of education for all students will preserve democracy. All humans are fundamentally the same.<sup>vii</sup> To be fair, education should be the same for all in a democracy and a balance of the following elements is essential

- use leisure time well
- earn a living ethically
- be responsible in democracy

Adler believes that the study of Western philosophy, politics, and religion should be at the college level. This will require a higher standardized system. He believes in three types of knowledge – organized knowledge (factual knowledge taught through lectures), intellectual skills (taught through coaching and supervised practice), and understanding ideas and values (taught through Socratic method of discussion and questioning). (Mortimer Adler: Personal Biography)<sup>viii</sup>

Educating young people who are culturally different while they are potentially the same sometimes require individual attention which is difficult in an overcrowded classroom. A reduction in class size is also a reduction in the achievement gap.

TheodoreSizer believes that to combine essential (specialized) school and core knowledge schools is the happy medium in presenting a balanced curriculum. A coalition of essential schools and core knowledge schools is the model generally adapted by the U.S. Department of Education. Sizer's approach to a balanced curriculum is in keeping with the concept of group strategies and a reduced class size will cater to diversity. His approach is in perfect alignment with education on-demand.

One could also argue that with the popularity of the internet, along with an educationally structured environment of the Theodore Sizer's essential/ core curriculum model, presents an opportunity to promote independent learning. We could accept the fact that Theodore Sizer has adapted John Dewey's concept of incorporating instructions and lessons into the student's active learning through social experience.

### **Social Services Changed Education - Social Issues – the disadvantaged/ disabled**

Industrialization created urban centers - a significant turning point for the education system we inherited. Taxpayers become critical of traditional classical curriculum teaching methods and the generally lax attitude of schools (Graham 1967).<sup>ix</sup>

There were major evolving reforms of social progressivism, which began about 1920 and lasted to World War II. Social issues, which have been dealt with since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as progressive reforms, were challenged by conservative groups who felt schooling should have focused more on traditional education with less social content.

During the 1950s, the era of the civil rights movement, social and political process had their effects on the educational system. President Dwight Eisenhower in 1957 had made attempts to introduce social policies.<sup>x</sup> This was the beginning of many social reforms which impact education today. There was also much protest caused by this civil rights movement. A landmark case, Brown vs. Board of Education, marked the formal ending of segregation and integrated the public school system.<sup>xi</sup> This significantly reversed a Court decision, Plessy vs. Ferguson, which supported segregation in the early 1900s.<sup>xii</sup>

In 2002, President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), an unequivocal commitment to the inclusion of all in education. This reform replaced the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that was signed into law in 1965.<sup>xiii</sup>

Title I program is “Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged”. This means that schools with a high concentration of students from low-income families receive federal education fund for K – 12, which is approximately 55% (2006-07).<sup>xiv</sup>

Another law that affected social issues and education was PL-94-142. Public Law-94-142, Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was signed into law by President Gerald Ford. The general provision was for the more than eight million handicapped children in the United States. Findings indicated that more than half of this population did not receive appropriate educational services or were excluded entirely from the public school system. They would not go through the educational process with their peers because families were often forced to seek outside private choices at their expense. Public Law 94-142 enabled all handicapped children to have appropriate public education available to them within the “time periods specified in section 612(2) (B).<sup>xv</sup>

### **Traditional curriculum values in conflict with progressivism**

Providing education to a large number of students at the public’s expense is the essence of our public school system. The result is that school administrators become accountable to the public for every decision made while operating public schools. The K -- 12 is a special responsibility of educators. The public seem to reserve the right to be critical of the curriculum and the quality of education a child receives. Urban centers are served by critics with a variety of viewpoints -- each group with separate agendas and needs beyond the capacity of the traditional public school system. Many other factors impact criticisms leveled at public schools. Class size and bilingual education are just a few reasons to establish appropriate reforms that will address these issues.

### **Charter Schools Reform can address reduced class size**

Charter schools could be the answer to a century old problem in reformation of the national education plan.

A charter school is a modular concept that provided it meets regulatory requirements of the Charter Schools Policy can serve specific needs of various communities. They solve many of our current public schools challenges, that is reduced class size, allow local

control, multiculturalism, bilingual education, improve sex education, increase school competition for grades and awards, and make teachers more accountable.

The objective is to replace rules-based governance with performance-based accountability, thereby simulating the creativity and commitment of teachers, parents, and citizens (Guide to US Department of Education Programs: 8/2008).

Charter operates with a tremendous amount of autonomy and freedom to use innovative teaching practices to meet the need and interest of diverse sectors of the school population.

### **Reducing Class Size to close the Educational Gap in the Urban Environment**

Class size is directly linked to the curriculum employed. Studies have shown that smaller classes are of greater benefit for most students. The perfect curriculum would likely eliminate the need for smaller classes and it is hoped that such a curriculum would solve our problems in education. The subject of class size and the curriculum has been a controversial issue discussed by citizens from all segments of society. It is clearly not possible to find a perfect solution.

Big cities contribute greatly to overcrowded classrooms based on myriad factors including population growth, transforming demographics and becoming a more diverse, multiethnic, multicultural community. Large cities in the United States are not homogenous in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These factors provide greater challenges for teachers in urban United States. In New York City, studies by the Manhattan Task Force on School Overcrowding, Class Size Matters, The United Federation of Teachers, and the Center for Arts Education concludes in a report, “A Better Capital Plan”<sup>xvi</sup> that the new five-year capital plan for schools proposed by New York City’s Department of Education should “aim to eliminate existing overcrowding and reduce class size to the levels in the city’s state-mandated class size plan, be proactive in planning for growth...for a well-rounded education”. Solving the problem of overcrowded classrooms is a very expensive proposition. One has to identify and set goals of achievement based on the number of

seats to be filled. Qualitative goals are established to close the education gap. “A Better Capital Plan” reports:

“Based on the DOE’s own data, approximately 167,842 new school seats would be necessary to eliminate trailers and other temporary spaces, relieve overcrowding and reduce class size to the goals in city’s state-mandated class size reduction plan”<sup>xvii</sup>.

Reducing class size is more expensive because more teachers and more classrooms are used to establish a place for every child. The capital plan prepares for growth incorporating neighborhood analysis of housing, birth data, pre-K enrollment in order to project future enrollment and capacity need. In New York City, these complex decisions are made by an inclusive process that involve DOE and School Construction Authority experts contributing to discussion of the utilization of arts, science, libraries, cafeteria, gyms and special services. Parent groups are an important part of the democratic process and there is often controversy. Julie Woestehoff, executive director of Chicago-based Parents United for Responsible Education, said, “Frankly what parents want schools to do is better for their children. They know best.”<sup>xviii</sup> The group’s suggestions in their document, “Common Sense Educational Reforms”, are ease overcrowding, plan a well-rounded curriculum, as well as include parental involvement.

New York City Chancellor Joe Klein opposes the suggestions of the parent groups.<sup>xix</sup> Chancellor Klein purports that tougher accountability measures are required which would result in “firing bad teachers and the closing of failing schools”. The parent group dismissed Mr. Klein’s explanation. They claim that Chancellor Klein is only offering a “beefed-up version of the unpopular No Child Left Behind Law”.

Comparisons are often made regarding education in the United States versus more homogenous societies such as China, India or Japan. It would be an unfair comparison simply because the challenges of teaching in overcrowded classroom group of students from diverse economic, cultural, and religious background is a Herculean task for even the best teacher available. Smaller classes are necessary to the standardized curriculum, which is our best guarantor, to maintain the minimum level of achievement for the slowest students to adapt to the main stream.

Reduced class size along with the base curriculum, for the benefit of students, will provide teachers with an opportunity to apply appropriate strategies to close the educational gap.

**Ruling in Favor Choice will help to reduce Class Size  
Supreme Court Case Zelman vs. Simmons-Harris (June 27, 2002)**

Decision:

In the Supreme Court, Justice Rinquest issued a landmark ruling in favor of school choice. “In a long-anticipated ruling, the Supreme Court upheld the Cleveland school choice program against a federal constitutional challenge and made it extremely unlikely that any such challenge could prevail against similar choice programs in the future. In its landmark opinion, the Supreme Court removed one of the unfortunate obstacles that opponents of choice have attempted to use to stop the growing spread and success of choice programs nationwide. The high court ruled definitely that allowing parents to use state scholarships for private schools, even if they include religious schools, does not violate the Constitution.” (Web Memo; The Heritage Foundation)

Rationale:

Of all the reforms adapted in public education system, parental choice seems to work quite well especially for low income families from urban communities. These families are affected in many ways because of the social and economic conditions of their public school systems. Parents feared that their children are subjected to unsafe conditions because of violence. The public schools are not adequately staffed with qualified teachers, have overcrowded classrooms and are not sufficiently equipped with books or lab equipment. There are usually concerns by some that their cultural beliefs or value are not accommodated. A major concern of parents was that public schools in low income communities could not correct the deficiencies in a reasonable time. That’s when parents need choice.

**Curriculum and the budget - how do we close the gap?**

NCLB focuses on data from proven teaching methods. In 2007, there was an allocation of \$1 billion to assist in the Reading First program implemented through to the third grade level.<sup>xx</sup>

"The National Governors Association estimates that 44 States currently face revenue "shortfalls." History shows that declining revenues for elementary and secondary education inevitably lead to fewer fully qualified teachers and larger class sizes.

The political process has changed schools in many ways and yet some will conclude, not nearly enough. Education expenditure in large part depends on issues of immigration policy, planned parenting and many social issues the government will not control in a free democracy. One of the first signs of how the political process has changed schools is evident in the budget allocations and population growth. From 1900-2000, enrollment in public schools grew from 15,500 millions to 47,000 million enrolled. Between 1950 and 2000, enrollment increased from 25,000 to 47,000 million.<sup>xxi</sup> School expenditure was \$560 billion compared with 2000 in which the annual expenditure was \$1.8 trillion.<sup>xxii</sup> Despite the influence of the political process on changes in schools, lawmakers continue to rely on the critics/ electorates to shape the political process and accede to the will of the voters.

To reduce class size, the number of teachers must increase to be in alignment with an increased number of classrooms. Lawmakers and education administrators will need to give budget allocation serious attention.

---

Bibliography

<sup>i</sup> Archived; *Promising Initiatives to Improve Education in Your Community – February 2000*, Class-Size Reduction, para 1; Retrieved November 19, 2008 (at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/promisinginitiatives/classize>)

<sup>ii</sup> Nelson, Jack L., Palonsky, Stuart B., McCarthy, Rose Mary, *Introduction: Critical Issues and Critical Thinking*, pp 18, Critical Issues in Education

<sup>iii</sup> Nelson, Jack L., Palonsky, Stuart B., McCarthy, Rose Mary, *Introduction: Critical Issues and Critical Thinking*, pp 18, Critical Issues in Education

<sup>vi</sup> *1964 Civil Rights Act*, Spartacus Educational; Retrieved November 16, 2008 (at <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAcivil64.htm>)

<sup>vii</sup> *Mandatory Schooling for All*, retrieved October 25, 2008 (at <http://myeclassonline.com/pub/content>)

<sup>viii</sup> *Mortimer Adler: Personal Biography*; retrieved November 22, 2008 ( at <http://www2.seu.edu/Academics/Faculty/nadams/educ692/Adler.html>)

<sup>ix</sup> Nelson, Jack L., Palonsky, Stuart B., McCarthy, Rose Mary, *Introduction: Critical Issues and Critical Thinking*, pp 18, Critical Issues in Education

<sup>x</sup> Retrieved November 16, 2008 (at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1072053/posts>)

<sup>xi</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

<sup>xii</sup> Retrieved: November 16, 2008 (at <http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/acs/1890s/plessy/plessy.html>)

<sup>xiii</sup> Retrieved: November 15, 2008 (at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020108.html>)

<sup>xiv</sup> Retrieved: November 15, 2008(at <http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/involve/schoolbox/booklet1>)

<sup>xv</sup> Cheadle, Barbara; PL-94-142-: *What Does It Really Say?* (1987): Retrieved November 15, 2008 (at <http://www.nfb.org/images/nfb/Publications>)

<sup>xvi</sup> *Campaign for A Better Capital Plan*"; Class Size Matters, The Center for Arts Education, Manahattan Task Force on School Overcrowding.

<sup>xvii</sup> *"Campaign for A Better Capital Plan"*; Class Size Matters, The Center for Arts Education, Manahattan Task Force on School Overcrowding.

<sup>xviii</sup> Green, Elizabeth, (2008), *"Parents Getting Into the Mix On Improving Public Schools"*; <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/parents-getting-ito-the-mix-on-improving-public/85344/>

<sup>xix</sup> Green, Elizabeth, (2008), *"Parents Getting Into the Mix On Improving Public Schools"*; <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/parents-getting-ito-the-mix-on-improving-public/85344/>

<sup>xx</sup> *Empowering Parents School Box: What Parents Should Know*, Washington, DC, 2007; Retrieved: November 15, 2008 (at <http://www.ed.gov/print/parents/academic/involve>)

<sup>xxi</sup> *Digest of Education Statistics, 2004*; Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education; Nelson, J. L., Palonsky, S. B., McCarthy, M: *Critical Issues in Education*; pp 14, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition

---

<sup>xxii</sup> *World Population, School Enrollments, Teachers, and Expenditures, 1980-2000*; UNESCO World Education report, 2000; Nelson, J. L, Palonsky, S. B., McCarthy, M: *Critical Issues in Education*; pp 12, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition