

POLICY BRIEF
An electronic publication of
The Allegheny Institute for Public Policy

May 13, 2003

Volume 3, Number 21

Smaller Classes—More Tax Dollars

As part of his plan to revitalize Pennsylvania, Governor Ed Rendell is promoting a new education plan for Pennsylvania's public school system. The Governor's plan relies on the tired, failed nostrum of increasing spending to improve performance. This includes reducing the student-teacher ratios in the Commonwealth's classrooms—a policy that has had negligible effects on academic achievement.

According to the Governor's plan for class size reductions, the goal is to have one teacher for every 17 children in kindergarten through 3rd grade. He claims that this "is precisely what the research encourages." However, academic research from around the country has been unable to find a consistent positive relationship between smaller class sizes and improved academic performance. Even in studies that do find a positive relationship, the enormous costs of such policies far outweigh the extremely small benefits.

In 1996, California instituted a policy to reduce class sizes for all students enrolled from Kindergarten through the 3rd grade. To achieve this goal, the state hired 60,000 new teachers at a cost of \$8 billion. Researchers from RAND, the Policy Analysis for California Education, and the American Institutes for Research monitored California's program. After 6 years, the researchers concluded that there is no relationship between statewide student achievement and the statewide class size reduction efforts. It did however add 60,000 new teachers to the union rolls. As California comes to terms with its current budget crisis, many districts are reversing policy and laying off teachers.

The Allegheny Institute conducted one of the first cross section data analyses of Pennsylvania's 501 school districts by analyzing the relationship of academic performance (Pennsylvania System of Scholastic Assessment—PSSA) to a number of variables including student-teacher ratios. Our findings match the conclusions of the California groups—student-teacher ratios do not have a significant measurable impact on academic performance.

Further, the Governor's plan will provide funds only for school districts where class size in K-3 is larger than 20 pupils per teacher. If the Governor believes the 17 to 1 pupil to teacher ratio is key to quality education, why limit state help to school districts with a ratio of over 20 to 1? That would mean that a district with a 20.1 to 1 ratio can get significant help, but if the ratio is 19.9 to 1 no additional help will be available. This

arbitrary limitation calls into question the Governor's commitment to the need for a 17 to 1 ratio in the K-3 grades.

Pennsylvania schools had 534,452 students in grades K-3 in 2000. Rendell's proposal provides "up to \$79 million to reduce K-3 class size for an additional 136,000 Pennsylvania children." We assume this to mean that there are 136,000 students in classrooms with student-teacher ratios above 20 to 1.

A call to the Pennsylvania Department of Education reveals that there is no way of knowing the number of teachers who are assigned to teach in grades K-3. The state has two categories of teacher: elementary (K-8) and secondary (9 through 12). An exact breakdown of who is assigned to teach K-3 is currently unavailable at the state level. Therefore, how the Governor arrived at 136,000 K-3 students in class sizes greater than 20 to 1 is unclear. What is clear from the Department of Education is that there are 1.231 million students enrolled in K-8 and 57,400 K-8 teachers for a ratio of 21.4 to 1.

Taking the total enrollment figures for grades K-3 in 2000 of 534,452 and conservatively assuming that the current average student teacher ratio for these grades is 19.5 to 1, then there would be 27,408 teachers in K-3. If that ratio were reduced to 17 to 1, which the Governor thinks should happen, then the Commonwealth would need 31,438 total K-3 teachers—an increase of 4,030 teachers. With teacher compensation of approximately \$50,000, hiring 4,030 new teachers will cost over \$201 million annually—far more than the \$79 million set aside by the Governor.

The Governor's plan does not require additional buildings or classrooms to house the new classes. Some schools may have extra classroom space to accommodate the new classes, some may be able to juggle existing classroom space, but some will require the building of new quarters to house the increase. In instances where new classrooms need to be built, will the school have to forgo access to the new funds?

The Governor's class size reduction plan is long on feel-good rhetoric but short on fiscal reality. Throwing more money at an educational system that on a per-pupil basis is among the costliest in the nation is not the answer to declining student performance. Reducing student-teacher ratios has not been proven to be a cost effective way to improve student achievement.

Frank Gamrat, Ph.D. Senior Research Associate

Jake Haulk, Ph.D. President

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Allegheny Institute for Public Policy
305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd. * Suite 305 * Pittsburgh PA 15234
Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085
E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org