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Big Kids, Small Classes?

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In a smaller class, kids get more attention from their teacher, right? So shouldn't classes be small all the way through school? In fact, as this ScienCentral News video reports, education researchers disagree sharply over whether smaller classes for upper grades are worthwhile.

Class Size Economics

Marie Doyle is the principal of [Bigelow Middle School](#) in Newton, Massachusetts, where the average class has 25 students. She believes kids would learn more in smaller classes, but her school can't afford them.

"The ideal class size would be 15," she says. "That's unrealistic. But if we could hold it to 20, that would be advantageous. Most school systems are limited by budget. The inability to keep class size small is based on the fact that you need more teachers, and it's too expensive."

Some education researchers have found that smaller classes, of 13 to 17 children, boost learning in the early grades, kindergarten through third grade. [Alan Krueger](#), an economist at [Princeton University](#), says smaller classes could help students in all grades. In [The Class Size Debate](#), a report for the [Economic Policy Institute](#), he wrote that one way class size reduction could pay off is by attracting teachers. "The burden is less for teachers with smaller classes," says Krueger. "So smaller classes can help to recruit and retain some of the best teachers in the classroom."

But in the same report, [Eric Hanushek](#), an economist at the [Hoover Institution](#) at [Stanford University](#), disagrees. "In order to reduce class size, you have to hire new teachers," says Hanushek. "If those new teachers are as good or better than the old teachers, you'll tend to get benefits from smaller classes. If those teachers, on the other hand, tend to be poorer teachers than the existing teachers, you will tend to see that class reduction actually hurts student achievement." Hanushek says this happened in California, [where a statewide initiative to reduce class size](#), launched in 1996, meant that many suburban school districts recruited experienced teachers

away from urban districts. Urban districts, many with the most disadvantaged children, were obliged to hire new, inexperienced teachers to replace the more qualified teachers whom they had lost.

"I don't think there's any question that the quality of teachers matters," counters Krueger. "Having a good teacher is obviously a good thing. Really talented teachers can handle a bigger class. But I suspect most of them will tell you that they will do a more effective job if they have a smaller class."

While Hanushek agrees that students benefit from smaller classes in the first years of school, he believes that there's no way to justify the cost of smaller classes for older kids. "There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that reducing class size in later grades is beneficial," he says. "So we know that the large expense of reducing class size in middle schools, in high schools, will in fact detract from other things that these schools could be doing, with no reason to suspect that there will be any real achievement gains."

Krueger admits that the effects of class size in the upper grades are harder to study than in the early grades "because there's not just one class size that a student has throughout the day. Students change classes; they may have one class size for math, a different class size for Spanish. The curriculum is not as well defined at the upper grades, and the idea of a 'class' is not as well defined either, since students have many different types of classes."

Still, Krueger thinks that "the evidence still supports the idea that students do better if they're in smaller classes." In the [Economic Journal](#), he reports that "what we do know is that with the same set of teachers, those teachers are more effective if they have smaller classes as compared with larger classes." And he says new teachers could have a better chance of improving if they teach smaller classes. So California's brand-new, inexperienced teachers may improve more quickly because they started out with smaller classes.

Both Krueger and Hanushek agree that given the extra costs, and the fact that disadvantaged students seem to gain the most in smaller classes, schools should give those students smaller classes first. This research appeared in [Economic Journal](#) (2003) and the [Economic Policy Institute's The Class Size Debate](#) (2002), which was funded by the Economic Policy Institute.