

Reference: Egelson, P. & Harman, P. (2000). Ten years of small class size in Burke County, North Carolina. In Wang, M.C. & Finn, J.D. (Eds.), How small classes help teachers do their best (pp. 279-297). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Center for Research in Human Development in Education.

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Background: The public school district of Burke County, North Carolina provides small classes of fewer than 18 students to all children in first, second, and third grades through a class-size initiative underway for a decade.

Purpose: To report the results of a district-wide initiative to reduce class size in the early grades.

Setting: Burke County Schools is a largely rural school district in western North Carolina that includes 17 elementary schools.

Population: Burke County Schools has a student population of 14,500; over one-third of students receive free or reduced-price lunch, a socioeconomic indicator of low family income. Demographically, the population of Burke County is 83% White, 8% African-American, 7% Asian, and 2% Hispanic; 40% of adults living in the county do not have a high school diploma.

Intervention: In the early 1990s average class size in the early grades in the Burke County Schools was about 25 students. During the 1991-92 school year, Burke County Schools began its class size initiative with a pilot project: all first-grade classrooms in four elementary schools were reduced to 17 students or fewer. The following year small class size was extended to all first-grade classes in all elementary schools, and small class size in second grade was piloted in the same four original elementary schools. In the 1994-95 school year, small class size was then extended to second grade classes in all elementary schools. Small class size was subsequently introduced to all third grade classes in Burke County Schools.

Research Design: Quantitative comparison using a matched-pair design; policy evaluation.

Data Collection and Analysis: For evaluation purposes, each student in a small class (17 students or fewer) was matched with another student in a regular-size class (of about 25 students), using the criteria of reading and math test scores, race, and gender. This “matched-pair” strategy occurred before small class sizes were implemented in all schools, allowing achievement gains to be compared in small and regular-size classes.

First-grade and second-grade students took the DC Heath reading test and the state-wide math test at the end of the school year. In third grade and beyond, students took the North Carolina End-of-Grade Tests at the conclusion of each school year.

Findings: Students in small classes significantly outperformed their counterparts in regular size classes in math and reading in both first and second grade. Students in small third-grade classes significantly outperformed their counterparts in reading. After all students returned to regular-

size classes in fourth grade, students who had been in small classes from first to third grade still significantly outperformed their counterparts in reading at the end of fourth grade.

The reading gains associated with small class size persisted several years after all students had returned to regular-size classes. Three and four years after being in a small class, sixth- and seventh-grade students who had been in small classes from first to third grade had higher reading scores than their counterparts, though the differences were not consistently statistically significant.

In general, there were no significant differences in math performance found after the second grade.

Conclusions: The Burke County Schools district shows that it is possible for a public school system to reduce class size in the early grades district-wide even with limited financial resources. Evaluations of test scores indicate that students in small classes (17 students or fewer) made significant academic gains in math in first and second grade, as well as in reading in first through fourth grade, when compared to matched pairs in regular size classes (about 25 students). Gains in reading achievement were still apparent several years after all students had returned to regular-size classes in fourth grade.