Reference: Duggan, Brad. (1990). Real issues and false assumptions about class size. *Streamlined Seminar*. National Association of Elementary School Principals, v. 9, n. 1, pp. 4-7.

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Background: The state of Texas substantially reduced class size in the early grades in public schools in the mid-1980s. Between 1983 and 1988 Texas reduced average class size in grades K-2 from about 27 students per teacher to about 20 students per teacher, a 26% reduction. Subsequent test scores on the Texas mastery exam at the end of 3rd and 5th grades showed a 15% improvement in achievement.

Purpose: To report the challenges faced by the state of Texas when it reduced class size in the early grades.

Research Design: Analytic essay.

Conclusions: Reducing class size in the early grades involves dealing both with "real issues" and "false assumptions."

"Real issues" include:

- The substantial additional costs of reducing class size. In Texas, for example, the state contributed $1.2 billion in new dollars to help fund small class size and other education reforms over a two-year period in the 1980s, and many school districts further found it necessary to raise local taxes and pass bond measures.

- The importance of narrowly defining class size. School-wide student-staff ratios can be misleading; in Texas, class size is defined as the number of students assigned to each teacher, excluding specialist teachers and support personnel.

- The need to provide teachers with continuing education to broaden and deepen their teaching strategies to take full advantage of smaller class sizes.

- The importance of implementing small class sizes where they have the greatest impact: the early grades of prekindergarten through fourth grade.

- Deciding what maximum class size to establish. In Texas, a maximum of 22 students was set with the knowledge that actual class size in day-to-day practice would be smaller due to absences and transfers.

- The need to implement class size reduction thoughtfully, with careful planning and evaluation built into the process and ample administrative capacity to solve logistical problems as they arise.

In contrast to these six "real issues," public attention is often focused instead on "false assumptions" about class size.

"False assumptions" include:

- Small class sizes must have no more than 15 students.

Research evidence over the past 15 years establishes that substantial reductions in class size leads to improved student achievement, whether the maximum class size in the smaller classes is then 17, 20, or 22 students.

- The money used to reduce class size could be used more effectively on other school reforms.

Studies such as Tennessee's Project Star clearly demonstrate that reducing class size in the early grades results in achievement gains for students.

- Class size reduction in the early grades should be implemented exclusively with disadvantaged children.

Research evidence shows that all students benefit from reduced class size.

- Some school districts and certain countries like Japan have high levels of student achievement despite large class sizes.

These learning environments, however, tend to be unique and non-transferable, and the major cross-cultural differences between the United States and other countries like Japan make class size comparisons extremely tenuous if not irrelevant.

- Teachers seek smaller classes because it results in better working conditions.

Proponents of class size reduction are driven by the gains in student achievement.

- Research evidence is not conclusive about the academic benefits of small class size.

In fact studies over two decades clearly establish the positive relationship between small class size and improved student achievement in the early grades.

- Efforts to reduce class size in the early grades carry a hidden intention to siphon off funds from secondary schools and redistribute them to elementary schools.

The true goal is to help all students achieve at high levels and to reach students at the beginning of their learning careers to promote early success.

- Educators sometimes rely on personal experience and anecdotal evidence to conclude that small class sizes are ineffective.

A plethora of research findings show the effectiveness of small classes in the early grades.

- Reducing class size will lead to less qualified teachers being brought into the classroom to meet the increased staffing needs.

There is no reason to assume that there is a dearth of qualified and competent teachers.

- Small class sizes are ineffective because over the previous decade the pupil-teacher ratio decreased but student achievement scores actually declined instead of going up.

This argument is specious because the concepts of "pupil-teacher ratio" and "actual class sizes" in the early grades are as different as apples and oranges, with more and more specialists and support staff in schools being folded into the school-wide "pupil-teacher ratio" calculations at the same time that actual class sizes remain unchanged.