



## Class size matters...not a whit

Perhaps the “fake news” story of the year – actually the last 20 years – is that small class size is essential to learning.

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Under the leadership of its cantankerous president Alex Caputo-Pearl, the United Teachers of Los Angeles is planning to strike – very possibly in January. The union’s demands haven’t budged, even as the Los Angeles Unified School District has made concessions. But unlike the union, LAUSD is constrained by fiscal realities, and has county and state auditors waiting to pounce if it missteps.

Other than portraying LAUSD chief Austin Beutner as “an out-of-touch millionaire” on a regular basis, the union’s main order of business – not surprisingly – is a salary increase for its teachers. But close behind in the demand department is the class size issue. The union is calling for an across-the-board chop, while the district is offering to reduce class size in 90 “high-need” schools. According to the latest data, the pupil-to-teacher ratio in Los Angeles is 19.7, not exactly an unreasonable number. (Nationally, in 1955 the ratio of teachers to students in public schools was 26.9 to one. In 2018, it is down to 14.5 to one, according to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics.)

So the union is trying to get the district to spend money it doesn’t have to fix a non-existent problem.

As a former teacher, I know that a small class makes life easier – fewer papers to grade and parents to have to deal with, for example. That said, there is no evidence that it makes a whit of difference in student learning. I and others have been writing about this for years, but old myths die hard. Now we have a new meta-analysis – results from multiple studies – which again shows that small class size is a red herring. The report, produced by the Danish Centre of Applied Social Science, examined 127 studies, eliminating many that did not meet strict research requirements, and finds that there *may* be tiny benefits to small classes for *some* students when it comes to reading. But in math, it found no benefits at all and the researchers “cannot rule out the possibility that small classes may be counterproductive for some students.”

So 127 studies later, it's basically a wash. The Danish analysis did nothing more than underscore Hoover Institution economist Eric Hanushek's results of his review of class-size studies in 1998. Examining 277 separate studies on the effect of teacher-pupil ratios and class-size averages on student achievement, he reported that 15 percent of the studies found an improvement in achievement, while 72 percent found no effect at all and 13 percent found that reducing class size had a negative effect on achievement. While Hanushek admits that in some cases, children might benefit from a small-class environment, there is no way "to describe a priori situations where reduced class size will be beneficial."

Additionally, EdChoice researcher and economics professor Benjamin Scafidi found that between 1950 and 2015, the number of teachers increased about 2.5 times as fast as the uptick in students. He adds that despite the staffing surge, students' academic achievement has stagnated or even fallen over the past several decades.

And the hiring uptick is not limited to teachers. As the late Cato Institute scholar Andrew Coulson wrote in 2012, public school employment doubled in 40 years, while student enrollment increased by only 8.5 percent – about an 11-to-1 ratio – and academic results stagnated. Coulson writes that teachers and aides accounted for about two-thirds of the hiring increase. The remaining hires were a mix of often needless support personnel, notably administrators, counselors, social workers, reading, curriculum specialists, etc. Coulson explains that if we returned to the student-to-staff ratio of 1970, "American taxpayers would save about \$210 billion annually in personnel costs."

When the true believers push for smaller class size, the unintended consequences are rarely acknowledged. Despite what many union leaders would have us believe, money is a finite entity and is wasted on mandated small classes. When class size is reduced, schools have to spend more to hire teachers. Districts are frequently forced to add portable classrooms or even build new schools to accommodate the small classes. Additionally, increased hiring dilutes the pool of qualified teachers.

So what do smaller class sizes actually accomplish?

For the unions, an increase in the teaching staff means more dues money and clout.

For the already overburdened taxpayer, less money.

For the children? Absolutely nothing.