

Larry Sand: It's time for larger classes, fewer teachers

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2010-08-13 15:18:02



President Barack Obama signed a bill Aug. 10 providing \$26.1 billion to states and local governments, including \$10 billion in education spending that figures to save many teaching jobs as the new school year begins.

This might be a good time to take a step back and ask – just how many teachers do we really need? When economic times are good, it is axiomatic that the education establishment, including the teachers' unions, screams that we need more teachers. The conventional wisdom is that more teachers mean smaller classes, which mean better-educated students because everyone knows that students will prosper more in a smaller class setting. (And, of course, every teacher on the payroll is a cash cow for the unions teachers are forced to join in most states.)

However, this is a situation where, if something is repeated enough, it would have to be a fact, right? Well, no. This is anything but a settled issue.

Yes, there have been studies showing that a smaller class size will help some students and other studies that say there are many more important things to consider, such as quality of the teacher.

According to education researcher Jay Greene, much of smaller-is-better crowd points to the STAR project, an experiment conducted in Tennessee in the 1980s. However the methodology used there was iffy at best. In a 1998 study, Stanford's Carolyn Hoxby found that "reductions in class size from a base of 15 to 30 students have no effect on student achievement."

There also was a study of class size studies, which stated, "In a synthesis of research on the effects of class size Robinson (1990) found that 50 percent of the studies concluded that smaller class sizes had a positive impact on student achievement for grades K-3, while 38 percent of the studies reached the same conclusion for grades 4-8, and only 18 percent of the studies found positive effects for class size for grades 9-12."

Hardly a resolved issue. And has anyone noted that there could be a downside to smaller classes?

According to Jay Mathews in a 2006 Washington Post article, "In 1996, California Gov. Pete Wilson persuaded the state Legislature to authorize a \$650 bonus to schools for every student attending a kindergarten-to-third-grade class with no more than 20 students. This produced many

more classes that required more teachers, many of whom, parents complained, were inexperienced and ineffective.”

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a government website, the pupil/teacher ratio – declined from 22.3 in 1970 to 15.5 in 2007. What happened to student test scores during that period? Using the National Assessment of Educational Progress, widely regarded as the nation’s report card, absolutely nothing. Scores have been flat for almost 40 years.

Hence, we have expanded the teacher pool greatly in comparison to student enrollment with no bang for the taxpayer’s buck.

So, to take this one step further, is it possible that bigger classes and fewer teachers are preferable? Very possibly, yes.

Andrew Coulson, Director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute, would seem to agree. He says we need fewer teachers, not more. He points out that, since 1970, public school enrollment has increased 10 percent, but school employment (teachers, teachers’ aides and other support staff) has increased by 100 percent, with no effect on student outcomes. Of the doubling of education workers – 41 percent have been teachers.

Also, when more teachers are hired, it will almost guarantee stretching the available teacher pool to a point where many of the new teachers will be of poorer quality, as happened in California. In fact, if every school district in the country stopped hiring and eliminated the bottom-performing 10 percent of their faculty, class size would increase 11 percent. Hence, a class of 20 students would become 22, and 30 would become 33.

Additionally, since there is only a finite amount of money available for education, with fewer working teachers there would now be more money available for increasing those teachers’ salaries, buying books, computers, or whatever the individual school district deems to be important.

And, retaining fewer teachers means hiring fewer paper-pushing bureaucrats and a smaller pension fund burden on cash-strapped states.

Instituting larger class sizes is a heretical idea and will be a tough sell – educrats and, especially, the teachers unions will continue to spread the small-class hype for their own ends. But perhaps one day the interests of school children and taxpayers will supersede those of the bureaucrats and the teachers’ unions.

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