

Issue in Brief: Small Class Sizes

All young people can benefit from supportive classrooms that enhance their full academic, social, and personal development. Smaller class sizes are one way to help teachers provide support tailored to the individual needs of every child. Reducing class sizes, particularly in early grades, can improve student engagement, academic achievement, and college readiness--but only if it is done right.

This fact sheet summarizes the Roadmap to Expanding Opportunity paper *The Right Size for Learning: Class Sizes in Massachusetts*. The full paper explores the evidence on class size reductions, compares current class sizes with optimum levels identified in research, and provides estimates for what it would take to reach these levels in targeted districts.

Research on the relationship between class size and student success has identified four main principles:

1. **Target the early grades.** Class size reductions have been most effective for students in kindergarten through 3rd grade. In particular, children in kindergarten and 1st grade classes have benefited the most from smaller class sizes.
2. **Target students with the greatest need.** While all students can benefit from smaller classes, there is evidence that students of color and low-income students particularly benefit from well-designed class size reductions.
3. **Ensure that classes are staffed with strong teachers.** Reducing class sizes often involves hiring additional teachers, and it is critical to ensure these new teachers are highly qualified.
4. **Combine class size reductions with other effective school practices.** Class size reductions are most effective when they are combined with other effective practices such as robust teacher training and support, increased learning time and enrichment, and services that address the social barriers that students and families face outside of the classroom.

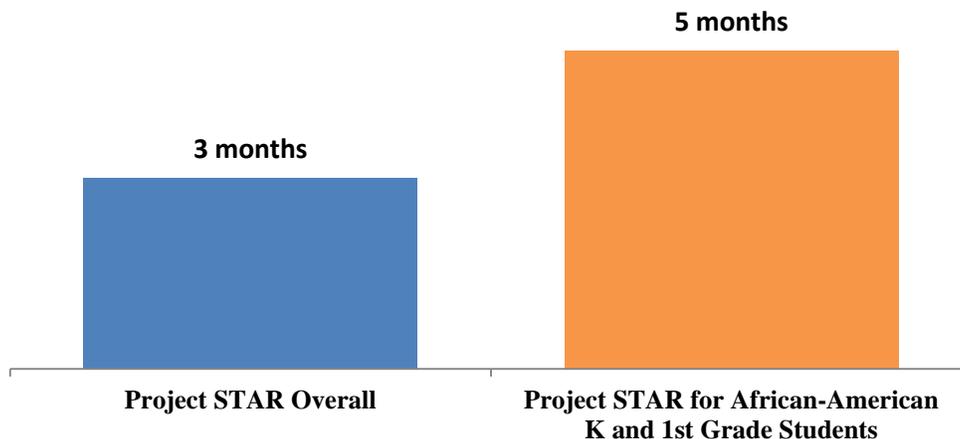
The Evidence: Well-Designed Programs Help Boost Achievement

One of the most effective class size reduction programs, Tennessee's Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (Project STAR) provided small classes of between 13-17 for students over four years between kindergarten and 3rd grade. Students in this program gained roughly 2-3 months of academic progress in reading and math compared to a control group, with twice the overall gains for students of color in kindergarten and 1st grade. Follow-up studies showed that the immediate boost from small classes persisted over time, with a similar effect that lasted through later grades and enhanced college preparation.

Several other class size reduction programs have also been successful, including the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (Project SAGE) in Wisconsin. This initiative effectively used small class sizes, along with teacher professional development and other effective school practices, to provide targeted support to low-income students. Participating schools, which served mostly low income students, reduced class sizes to 15, used best-practice curriculum, enhanced teacher development and collaboration, and provided after-school and other enrichment activities. Students in the program gained roughly 2-3 months of academic progress in English and math, with greater gains for African-Americans, helping to close achievement gaps.

Small Class Sizes in Project STAR Benefited Youth, Particularly Students of Color

Math & Reading Test Score Gains Compared to Control Group



Despite these encouraging examples, not all class size reduction efforts have been well implemented. In California, a large scale program to reduce class sizes in elementary schools failed to deliver academic gains due to hiring less qualified teachers, not effectively targeting the schools most in need, and not reducing class sizes sufficiently. This cautionary tale showed that smaller class sizes should be put in place intentionally with well-prepared teachers while prioritizing students most in need.

What Could Massachusetts Do? How Much Would It Cost?

Findings from well-implemented class size reduction programs suggest that the Commonwealth could boost achievement by reducing class sizes to 15 students in kindergarten through 3rd grade, particularly in low-income schools. Among the 461 elementary schools across the state serving 40 percent or more low-income students, 90 percent, or 414, have class sizes larger than 15. These schools have average class sizes of 20 students, however this data may understate typical class sizes, because it includes both mainstream classrooms as well as smaller self-contained classes for special education students and English Language Learners.

Bringing class sizes down to 15 at these 414 target schools would involve hiring an average of 4 to 5 teachers in each school and a statewide total of approximately 1,840 new educators. Based on average teacher salary and benefit costs in these particular areas this effort would cost roughly \$161 million annually. Any class size reduction program should incorporate funding for new teacher training and facilities upgrades to provide additional classroom space where necessary. If it is done right, creating a foundation of individualized support and attention for children in early elementary school can be a part of promoting the academic, social, and personal growth of kids across Massachusetts.

Cost of Additional K-3 Teachers (salary & benefits)	Teachers Added to Target Districts and Schools (2013-2014)	Total Statewide Cost
\$87,700	1,840	\$161 million

For the full report, "The Right Size for Learning" and other research, visit the [Roadmap to Expanding Opportunity website at:](http://ExpandingOpportunity.org)

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