Project
STAR NEWS

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Benefits of small classes pay off at graduation

Project STAR finds small classes in K-3 linked to greater student achievement, better grades, lower dropout rates, and higher college aspirations

Washington, D.C. – A ground-breaking Tennessee-based class size study has found that public school students placed in small classes in grades K-3 continue to outperform students in larger classes right through high school graduation.

Researchers for **Project STAR** (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio) – whose earlier findings helped form the basis for class size reduction in some 20 states – today reported that students placed in small class sizes in grades K-3 have better high school graduation rates, higher grade point averages, and are more inclined to pursue higher education.

"This research adds to the evidence we have compiled over the past 14 years," said Dr. Helen Pate-Bain, who convinced the Tennessee state legislature to provide funding for the initial STAR research. "The project's findings indicate that students placed in small classes in grades K-3 continue to benefit from that experience in grades 4-12."

The original STAR research tracked the progress of an average of 6,500 students each year in 79 schools between 1985 and 1989 (and 11,600 students overall). It found that children who attended small classes (13-17 pupils per teacher) in kindergarten through grade 3 outperformed students in larger classes (22-25 pupils) in both reading and math on the Stanford Achievement Test for elementary students. The second phase of the STAR research found that even after returning to larger classes in grade 4, STAR's small class students continued to outperform their peers who had been in larger class sizes.

At a news conference held today at the National Press Club, STAR researchers released a new wave of findings:

- **Students in small classes are more likely to pursue college**: STAR students who attended small classes – and black students in that group in particular – were more likely to take the ACT or SAT college entrance exams, according to Princeton University economist Dr. Alan B. Krueger, who researched test data linked to the Project STAR database. "Attendance in small classes appears to have cut the black-white gap in the probability of taking a college-entrance exam by more than half," Krueger said.
- **Small classes lead to higher graduation rates**: Preliminary data from participating STAR school districts in Tennessee show that students in small classes were more likely to graduate on schedule; they were less likely to drop out of high school; and they were more likely to graduate in the top 25% of their classes, according to Dr. Jayne Boyd-Zaharias, a STAR researcher since 1986. In addition, Boyd-Zaharias found that small class students graduated with higher grade point averages (GPAs) than regular class size students.
- **Students in small classes achieve at higher levels**: Three other researchers – Dr. Jeremy D. Finn, professor of education at SUNY Buffalo, Susan B. Gerber of SUNY Buffalo, and Charles M. Achilles, Ed.D., of Eastern Michigan University, together with Boyd-Zaharias – released new findings showing that STAR students who attended small classes in grades K-3 were between 6 and 13 months ahead of their regular-class peers in math, reading, and science in each of grades 4, 6, and 8. "Our analyses show that at least three years in a small class are necessary in order for the benefits to be sustained through later grades," wrote the researchers. "Further, the benefits of having been in a small class in the primary years generally increase from grade to grade."
- **Class size is different from pupil/teacher ratio**: Achilles, one of the original STAR researchers, explained the difference between class size (the number of students assigned to a teacher) and pupil/teacher ratio (the total number of students divided by the total number of educators in a school). Many "class size" studies, he noted, have relied on pupil/teacher ratios to make their case. The STAR research is able to track students based on specific class size. Achilles noted that some 20 states – including Michigan, California, Nevada, Florida, Texas, Utah, Illinois, Indiana, New York, Oklahoma, Iowa, Minnesota, Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Wisconsin – have initiated or considered STAR-like class size reduction efforts.

Teachers who taught small classes in Project STAR support the program strongly.

"All educators instinctively know that the smaller the class size, the more individual attention a teacher can provide a student," said Sandy Heinrich, a teacher at Granbery Elementary School in Davidson County, Tenn., who taught first grade in the STAR program in 1986. "The more individual attention per student, the more learning and personal growth each student can enjoy. I was fortunate enough to witness this notion first-hand."

The STAR research is the only large-scale, long-term class size research of its kind. Dr. Frederick Mosteller, a professor of mathematical statistics at Harvard University, said this about STAR in 1995: "Because a controlled education experiment (as distinct from a sample survey) of this quality, magnitude, and duration is a rarity, it is important that both educators and policymakers have access to its statistical information and understand its implications."

In fact, the STAR research provided support for federal legislation that proposes to reduce class sizes by hiring 100,000 new teachers in grades K-3 nationwide.

Last fall, Congress appropriated $1.2 billion in the FY1999 federal budget as a "down-payment" on that legislation, enough to hire approximately 30,000 teachers for one year. Future funding will require congressional authorization and additional annual appropriations. Pate-Bain was scheduled to share the new STAR findings with a number of education policy experts and Members of Congress later in the day.

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