



# LEADS

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## An Introduction to LEADS

LEADS is one of the ways the Center for Educational Policy and Leadership (CEPAL) provides educators and policy makers with research-based information that can be used to improve the education of all students.

We call this publication LEADS to suggest that research seldom provides definitive answers to tough questions. Rather research can be a valuable resource that educational leaders can use to shape policy and practice relevant to the various conditions and needs which provide the context for action they are considering.

This inaugural issue of LEADS is based on a synthesis of research on class size prepared by Jennifer King Rice, Associate Professor of Education at the University of Maryland and Director of CEPAL.

## Some Guidelines for Investing in Class Size Reduction

One of the most popular strategies for improving schools, and probably the most expensive per student, is the reduction of class size. While researchers continue to debate the cost-effectiveness of class size reduction policies, most agree that smaller classes make sense under certain circumstances. The following four considerations are intended to help guide education leaders as they decide whether and how to invest in smaller classes.

1. **Target the Policy** – Evidence from trend analysis, non-experimental studies, as well as experimental and quasi-experimental studies suggests that the positive effects of smaller classes are most pronounced for students from minority and low-income families. Rather than implementing universal class size reduction policies, targeting smaller classes to schools with higher concentrations of these types of students may produce the greatest return on the investment -- the costs would presumably be lower and the effects higher. In addition to being more efficient, such targeted policies also have the potential to contribute to the equity and adequacy of students' education opportunities.
2. **Ensure an Adequate Foundation** – It is important to consider not just the direct costs associated with that intervention, but also resources that need to be in place if the intervention is to work. A good example is the California Class Size Reduction program, which set out to reduce all classes in grade K-3 across the state to twenty students or fewer. Over \$1 billion was provided to support the hiring of new teachers, but a limited supply of two other important resources complicated implementation: (1) a large pool of qualified teachers to assume the new positions, and (2) adequate facilities to accommodate the dramatic increase in the number of classes. Given what we know about the importance of teacher quality in particular, it is reasonable to surmise that lack of qualified teachers and adequate classroom space has the potential to seriously undermine any positive effects that might be expected to result from the investment in smaller class sizes. Further, wide-scale class size reduction policies can dramatically affect the distribution of teacher quality across communities and thereby have serious implications for equity. Care should be taken to ensure that schools with large concentrations of poor students do not end up with lower quality teachers due to the limited supply of well-prepared teachers coming into the system or the migration of their best teachers to more attractive schools and school systems.

Class size, continued...

**3. Consider the Context of Policy and Practice.** The broader policy context has implications for both the cost and the effectiveness of class size reduction. Policies to reduce class sizes have been called an opportunity, not a treatment, implying that there are certain conditions under which reductions in class size can produce achievement gains. On one hand, there are *complementary policies* – such as targeted teacher professional development - that are likely to interact with class size reduction to yield a more positive effect. On the other hand, there are *competing policies* – such as extended school days – that have the potential to be compromised in favor of class size reduction because they both depend on a considerable investment of resources. Policy makers must consider how class size reduction fits into this broader policy context.

**4. Weigh the Costs and Effects of Multiple Policy Options.** There are lots of policy alternatives that may be found to be effective -- more than our limited stock of resources can support. The question is not simply *whether* to reduce class sizes, but rather which investments are most effective? Class size reduction is one possibility, but other popular alternatives include teacher salary increases, more time for instruction, smaller schools, and an expansion of early educational opportunities for youngsters. Each of these policy options could be shown to be worth the investment, but given the limited stock of resources available, more information is needed to guide decisions about which of these investments are most cost-effective. While evidence about the relative effectiveness of different programs is difficult to obtain, placing alternative options on the policy table and linking deliberations to information on costs and effects may help educational leaders shape more effective use of limited resources for school improvement.

This issue of **LEADS** is drawn from:

Rice, J. K., (2002). Making the evidence matter: Implications of the class size research debate for policy makers, In L. Mishel & R. Rothstein (Eds.), *The class size policy debate* (pp. 89-94). Washington, D.C. Economic Policy Institute.

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