Continuing research shows increases in class sizes harming students' chances to learn

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Students in small classes in kindergarten through third grade see improvements in students learning and behavior in all academic subject in every grade, says UB's Jeremy Finn.

The benefits of small classes help students and last longer than previous research indicated, according to a nationally respected expert on education, class size and school discipline.

In fact, the benefits of small classes have never been more conclusive, writes Jeremy D. Finn, PhD, SUNY Distinguished Professor in the University at Buffalo's Graduate School of Education, in a new book.

"Does class size (still) matter?" Finn asks in a chapter to be published in "Class Size: Eastern and Western Perspectives," to be published by Routledge Press in 2016. Finn's co-author on the chapter is Michele E. Shanahan, clinical associate professor in the UB Graduate School of Education.

"The answer is unequivocally 'yes,'" says Finn. "Small classes—fewer than 20 students—in the kindergarten through third grade are accompanied by improvements in student learning and behavior in all academic subjects in every grade."

These advantages last years after the smaller classes end. Although all students benefit from small classes, the benefits for minority students are as much as three times greater than the benefits for whites.

"The benefits carry over to later grades, especially for students who attend small classes for three or four consecutive years," Finn and Shanahan write. "In high school, students who had attended small classes in K-3 were also more likely to take advanced courses in subjects such as math and science, and showed more motivation to attend college by virtue of taking college entrance exams."

According to Finn and Shanahan, long-term follow-up studies showed attending small classes increased the chance of graduating from high school, especially among students from low-income homes, and increased the likelihood of attending college, especially among African-American students.

"As young adults, black students who attended small classes had an

increased likelihood of being employed, and males had higher earnings than those who were in larger classes."

For years, the trend across the U.S. has been to reduce class sizes in the early grades.

"Under President Bill Clinton, the U.S. Department of Education initiated a class-size reduction program that subsidized the hiring of additional teachers nationwide," Finn writes. "The DOE also released several reports with data supportive of small classes in the early grades, reversing its earlier 'doesn't matter' position on the issue."

That trend has reversed. Class sizes are increasing nationwide, climbing even more quickly than they decreased in preceding decades. "Declining economies in recent years may have blurred people's memories, if not concern for quality education," according to Finn and Shanahan.

"The current trend of increasing class sizes is counterproductive and eliminates educational opportunities and benefits for many," Finn and Shanahan write. "It is harmful to all students, but especially minorities and those from low-income homes. Students are being denied the opportunity for higher levels of academic achievement and for ensuing school-related advantages.

"Returning classes to their previous sizes (or larger) retracts many of the opportunities these students had been provided over previous years. As educators, we must oppose this trend. The experience and opinions of educators and scientific data on the issue are compelling."

Finn and Shanahan also summarize research on classroom dynamics that change simply by virtue of a class being small.

"Every class size study since the 1970s found teacher morale to be

higher in small classes. Their demeanor, in turn, is perceived by the students. Teachers are also more tolerant of normal amounts of student misbehavior. This may be because teachers do not feel their control of the classroom is threatened or that misbehavior can escalate to the point where instruction is disrupted," they write.

"Teacher-student relationships are closer in small classes, creating a feeling for students that they are welcome in the classroom, supported emotionally and respected as individuals."

By analyzing classroom dynamics, Finn and Shanahan show that small-class dynamics cannot be reproduced in larger classes.

The two UB researchers make several pointed recommendations. They say priority for small classes should be given to those who would benefit the most:

- **The youngest grades (K-3)**. Research shows benefits are maximized during these years of rapid growth. This also allows for students to remain in small classes for several contiguous years, maximizing the long-term benefits.
- **Schools with highly overcrowded classrooms**. Classes of 26 or more limit the teacher's ability to communicate with individual students, to spend sufficient time in instruction, or to manage class behavior well. "Overcrowded classrooms do not allow teachers to do what they have been taught to do," one educator says.
- **Minority students and those from low-income homes**. If resources are not adequate to provide small classes for all students, then targeting them to those most in need is still worthwhile. It will result in maximal short-term and long-term benefits.

"State and federal administrations should play major roles in the push for small classes," the authors write. Schools and local communities are not well-positioned to invest in long-term social benefits."

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