

Class Size

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Class-Size Policies

By Kyle Zinth
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Overview

The logic behind keeping class size low is powerful: The fewer kids teachers have to deal with in a classroom, the thinking goes, the more time they can focus on delivering high-quality individualized instruction. Evidence indicates that class sizes have the most effect in the K-3rd grades, especially if those classes are below 20 students. (For a more detailed look at what the research says about the effectiveness of small class sizes, see the primer in this [ECS document](#).)

Many states have chosen to keep classes small by using one of two approaches:

1. Placing caps on the number of students who may be in one classroom
2. Enacting initiatives to reduce class size.

While these approaches may sound very similar, and experience a certain degree of overlap in some states, they do have some key general differences.

Maximum Class Size Policies

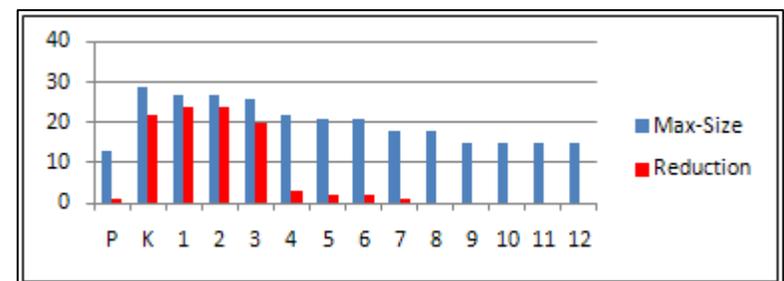
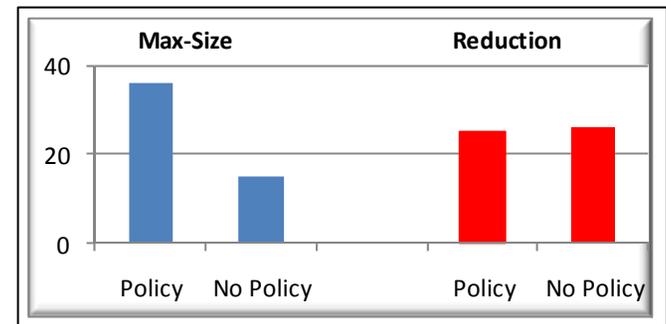
The majority of states – 36 – currently have at least one policy via statute or regulation at the state level that places a limit on the number of students that may be in any one general-education classroom. States that have implemented class-size limitations have clearly shown a preference for policies at the elementary level, and especially for K-3rd grades.

Some characteristics of maximum class-size policies include:

- Higher popularity at the K-3 level than at other grade levels
- General statewide nature
- Variations: include mandates tied to state funding and recommendations for best practice.

Policy example:

Kentucky law¹ states that the maximum number of pupils enrolled in any class may not exceed the limits stated below for each grade:



- K-3rd: 24
- 4th: 28
- 5th-6th: 29
- 7th-12th: 31.

The commissioner of education is directed to enforce maximum class sizes for every academic course requirement in all grades except in vocal and instrumental music, and physical education classes. Exemptions may be granted by the department of education upon recommendation of the superintendent that unusual circumstances exist, including, but not limited to, a lack of classroom space.

Class-Size Reduction Policies

Twenty-five states currently have policies addressing class-size reductions to a level below 22 students per classroom. The vast majority of these policies target students in the elementary grades, with the K-3rd grade range being especially popular. Fifteen states specifically focus policies on students in grades K-3. Some characteristics of maximum class-size policies include:

- Near exclusive existence at the K-3 level
- Tendency to be more targeted at specific populations
- Variations: include mandates and voluntary grant programs.

Policy Example

Illinois policy² creates a voluntary program that provides grants to reduce class size to no more than 20 students per teacher in grades K-3. Eligibility is limited to districts with schools serving K-3rd grades that are on the academic warning list or the academic watch list.

Conclusion

Although similar in their goals, class-size reduction policies and maximum class-size policies can vary greatly in their scope. Policymakers wishing to ensure small class sizes should consider the facets of each approach. For a more detailed examination of state policies relating to class size, please see ECS StateNotes on:

- [Maximum P-12 Class-Size Policies](#)
- [State Policies Focusing on Class-size Reduction.](#)

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Helping State Leaders Shape Education Policy

¹ KY. REV. STATE. ANN. § 157.360

² 105 ILL. COMP. STAT. 5/2-3.134(a), ILL. ADM. CODE TIT. 23, § 565.10 - § 565.60