

2015 Classroom Size Research Analysis Project

Sponsored by the Lincoln School Committee

I: Summary

The Lincoln School Committee has been discussing its class size policy recently, in part due to feedback from Lincoln community members and in part because the last revision of the policy came in 2007.

In discussing the policy, a hypothesis was raised that since 2007 there may be new evidence and research around the benefits of smaller class sizes on educational outcomes that, once considered, would support a change to our current policy.

This proposal is for the Lincoln School Committee to initiate an investigation into the current state of evidence and educational research about classroom size and its impact on educational outcomes, to help determine if the School Committee should formally review its current policy.

The explicit objectives of this initiative would be:

- To clarify what new research is available and qualify its relevance to Lincoln's educational environment;
- To determine to what extent the new evidence supports an urgency in revising the Class Size policy above and beyond (or in addition to) a similar focus on other educational improvements in a budget-constrained environment; and,
- as appropriate, to summarize the high-quality evidence and insights as input to a potential Class Size Policy revision process.

As an outcome of this process, there will be:

- a summary of the Classroom Size research;
- evidence-supported answers to key questions (to be provided in a research brief, prepared by the School Committee); and,
- a conclusion about whether the new research supports a formal review of the Classroom Size policy.

The School Committee will create a Class Size Research Committee, comprising 4-6 members, including one School Committee member, one person to be appointed by the town Finance Committee, and 2-4 community members. The School Committee will solicit application for membership on this Committee, and the Chair will review the applications and make a recommendation to the School Committee, which will appoint the community members. Priority will be given to applicants who

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are familiar with formal research processes, and in particular, with educational research.

While Research Committee may seek some input from Lincoln School District administration and teaching staff, we make clear the explicit expectation that this project will not burden these individuals with significant requests of time or effort.

Timeline:

We will send out a request for participation within 10 days of approval of this proposal from the School Committee and leave approximately two weeks for applications of interest (up to three weeks depending on school vacations).

The School Committee will then appoint individuals to this project team and request that the team initiate the work immediately with a final report to be delivered no later than April 20th, 2015.

II: Draft Key Questions

The Lincoln School Committee requests that this research project be driven by the following key questions. These questions will be revised prior to the launch of the project.

1. What new evidence since 2007 supports the hypothesis that a reduction in class sizes should be a primary tool for improving educational quality?
 - a. How strong does this evidence appear to be?
 - b. Are there any apparent biases?
 - c. How well does the evidence apply to the Lincoln environment?
2. What new evidence contradicts that hypothesis?
 - a. How strong does this evidence appear to be?
 - b. Are there any apparent biases?
 - c. How well does the evidence apply to the Lincoln environment?
3. Is there any evidence that might indicate that a change from our current preferred and maximum numbers of students per class could have a measurable impact, or evidence that an incremental change would have no impact? What is that measurable impact and is there any evidence showing an ideal number or ideal numbers at particular grades?
4. Do all students benefit equally from smaller class sizes or are there additional factors at play, including but not limited to: cohort age, overall level of educational achievement (e.g. high-performing districts vs low-performing

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- districts), individual student achievement (e.g. low achievers vs high achievers), school size, and special-needs populations. Please qualify and/or quantify the impact of these additional factors where there is evidence.
5. What are the specific measurable benefits (e.g. scores on standardized tests or other district assessments) of small class sizes and how long do these benefits last?
 6. What specifically contributes to the benefit of smaller class sizes (or, what problems does it solve)? Is it less distraction, more time for the teacher to focus on individuals, more opportunity for the teacher to adapt to the specific learning needs within the classroom, or some other factors? Or is it unknown?
 7. In line with the previous question, does teacher-to-student ratio have the same effect as overall class size and if not, why not?
 8. How well does the available evidence demonstrate how class sizes may or may not grow as the cohorts advance through the grades, while still retaining the benefits of initial smaller classroom sizes? E.g. is there any evidence that suggest at what age it is acceptable to move from a smaller class size to a more moderately or large-sized class?
 9. Specifically to the previous question, is there evidence to say that our overall Classroom Policy is good but we need to revisit the acceptable ranges for only Grades 3-5 or a similar subset of grades?

Critical Concluding Questions

10. Is there any evidence that compares the efficacy of smaller classroom sizes with other educational interventions that would come from the same budget? In other words, what evidence shows that we should invest in smaller class sizes at Lincoln instead of other items supported by the Lincoln strategic plan such as (but in no way limited to): greater professional development along the lines of authentic learning, differentiating instruction, meaningful exchanges, assessing student understanding, and learning targets/objectives; refining the curriculum for ELA, Math and Science; better use of data to monitor student growth and to inform instruction; stronger infusion of educational technology into classrooms and schools; stronger STEM/STEAM investment; and more funding available for the School Building project?
11. To what extent does the evidence demonstrate a need for change in policy (and budget) that we should feel confident in asking the town for a budget override? That is to say, is there a sufficiently strong case to make to the town, should a revision of Class Size policy have an impact on overall budget?