



**MITIGATING LIKELY HARMS OF IMPLEMENTING CLASS SIZE CAPS IN NEW YORK CITY**

**Statement of**

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**before the**

**New York City Council**

**Committee on Education**

**OVERSIGHT - IMPLEMENTING THE STATE CLASS SIZE LAW IN NEW  
YORK CITY**

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\* The views expressed are my own and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

Chair Joseph and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony about the implementation of the State Class Size Law in New York City.

I am vice president for education data and policy at the Urban Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in Washington, DC. My colleagues and I support evidence-based education policymaking by conducting original research, creating policy analysis tools, and democratizing data.

I have published several studies on class size, including analyses of the potential implications of implementing the State Class Size Law. I also was a member of last year's class size working group convened by New York City Public Schools chancellor David Banks.

My conclusion based on research from across the nation and analyses of New York City data, conducted both by my team and other independent analysts, is that the State Class Size Law, while well-intentioned, could harm student success and education equity in New York City. New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) will need to carefully implement the law to reduce these harms, though state action to amend the law is likely required to eliminate them entirely.

## **Research Does Not Support Class Size Caps**

No student should learn in an overcrowded classroom, and there are good reasons for families and educators to want smaller classes for students. But whether the right number of students in a class is 20 or 25 has no clear, evidence-based answer because of the budgetary trade-offs required between hiring classroom teachers and funding other educational resources and student supports.

All else equal, most families, educators, and school leaders would prefer a class size of 20 to one of 25.<sup>1</sup> But all else is not equal, because school leaders need to balance class size with a range of other educational needs. For example, when principals decide how many classroom teachers to hire, they are thinking not just about class size but about how much money they want to have left over for math coaches, guidance counselors, psychologists, social workers, music programs, and after-school activities.

Requiring principals to meet the caps of the State Class Size Law effectively forces them to make decisions that they do not think best serve their students: to fire those math coaches or guidance counselors or art teachers, to cancel those after-school programs, or to limit the degree to which they can take a "whole child" approach to education.

Imposing the judgment of state policymakers over that of school leaders might make sense if a strong evidence base showed that the class size caps required by the law (20 in grades K–3, 23 in grades 4–8, and 25 in grades 9–12) were a better use of educational dollars than anything else a school might do.

But that is simply not the case. The conventional wisdom that smaller classes are better, and that they are especially effective in the early grades and for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, is based

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<sup>1</sup> Colyn Ritter, "The Top 10 Findings from EdChoice's 2023 Schooling in America Survey Series," EdChoice, August 1, 2023, <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/the-top-10-findings-from-edchoices-2023-schooling-in-america-survey-series/>.

primarily on a randomized experiment conducted in Tennessee in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> That study is important, but the few other high-quality studies mostly find smaller or negligible effects of smaller classes.<sup>3</sup> One exception is a recent study from New York City that found class size effects on test scores about as large as the Tennessee study, but those benefits were offset by reduced learning in the classrooms of the new teachers that were hired to reduce class size.<sup>4</sup> In other words, getting the benefit of the smaller class came at the cost of hiring a teacher who was new to the school (and perhaps to the profession).

Even if we take the Tennessee results at face value, it is still not clear that smaller classes produce the best bang for the educational buck. For example, there is evidence that interventions such as tutoring, early childhood programs, and increases in instructional time have larger benefits relative to their costs than class-size reduction.<sup>5</sup> What's more, evidence from states that have implemented broad class-size reduction policies, such as California and Florida, suggests much smaller benefits.<sup>6</sup>

To be clear, there are good reasons for principals to keep classes from being too large and some evidence indicating that students will learn more in smaller classes. But there is no research-backed definition of "too large," and the evidence simply is not compelling enough to overrule principals' judgments by requiring them to adhere to inflexible caps.

## **Class Size Caps Would Likely Reduce Education Equity in New York City**

There is concerning evidence the State Class Size Law will do more harm than good in New York City. Without new funds to support the implementation of the law, principals may have to cut higher-impact activities to fund smaller classes, leading to worse student outcomes.

Most troubling from an equity perspective is the possibility that resources will be directed away from higher-need schools, which tend to have smaller classes already, to reduce class sizes in lower-need schools. And many of the schools with larger class sizes are popular schools that may have to turn families away, because the class-size mandates mean room for fewer students, leading to fewer seats at schools regarded as high-quality.

In recent analyses of data from New York City, my colleagues and I estimated that 80 percent of white and Asian students would see their class sizes reduced under full implementation of the State Class Size

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew M. Chingos, "Class Size and Student Outcomes: Research and Policy Implications," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 32, no. 2 (2013): 411–38. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.21677>.

<sup>3</sup> All rigorous research on the effects of class size on student outcomes is based on data from elementary and middle schools. I am not aware of any high-quality evidence on class size in high schools.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Gilraine, "A Method for Disentangling Multiple Treatments from a Regression Discontinuity Design," *Journal of Labor Economics* 38, no. 4 (2020): 1267–1311. <https://doi.org/10.1086/706740>.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas N. Harris, "Toward Policy-Relevant Benchmarks for Interpreting Effect Sizes: Combining Effects with Costs," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 31, no. 1 (2009): 3–29.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew M. Chingos, "The Impact of a Universal Class-Size Reduction Policy: Evidence from Florida's Statewide Mandate," *Economics of Education Review* 31, no. 5 (2012): 543–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2012.03.002>; Christopher Jepsen and Steven Rivkin, "Class Size Reduction and Student Achievement: The Potential Tradeoff between Teacher Quality and Class Size," *Journal of Human Resources* 44, no. 1 (2009): 223–50.

Law, compared with 56 percent of Black students and 66 percent of Hispanic students.<sup>7</sup> We also found that higher-income students would be more likely to see their class sizes reduced (78 percent, compared with 67 percent of lower-income students). These differences result from the fact that Black, Hispanic, and lower-income students are more likely to be enrolled in classes that already meet the caps than are Asian, white, and higher-income students. And these results are broadly consistent with analyses conducted by New York City's Independent Budget Office.<sup>8</sup>

This means that fully implementing the law will require directing more resources to lower-need schools, potentially reducing funding equity in New York City.<sup>9</sup> And if NYCPS implements the law without significant new resources, it may have to redirect funding from higher-need schools to lower-need schools. Across the board, most schools will likely have to make cuts in non-instructional personnel to make the class size budget math work.

The law will also require hiring thousands of new teachers over the coming years. This means that more students will be taught by less experienced teachers, which research shows blunted the initial benefits of a California class size policy in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> These new positions will be concentrated in lower-need schools; if these positions are filled by teachers who transfer from higher-need schools, it may exacerbate shortages of experienced teachers at the schools that arguably need them most.

Class size reduction in New York City is a textbook illustration of the adage that “equal is not equitable.” An equal mandate (the class size caps) applied to a school system where resources (including smaller classes) are somewhat equitably distributed will lead to less equity. As state education commissioner Betty Rosa noted about the class size law, “You’re gonna have to take it from Peter to give it to Paul.”<sup>11</sup>

## Recommendations for Reform and Implementation

The state is in the strongest position to mitigate the inequitable impacts of the class size law by amending it to target those students most in need of additional educational resources and supports. The law currently requires the city to prioritize schools with higher poverty levels for class size reductions. Limiting the mandates to just those schools or having lower caps on class size in higher-needs schools would be more equitable than the current uniform mandate.

If the state chooses not to make the law more targeted, reducing implementation costs can help mitigate the law's negative impact on funding equity.<sup>12</sup> If total costs are lower, then the city can more

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Chingos and Ariella Meltzer, “Class Size Reductions May Be Inequitably Distributed under a New Mandate in New York City” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Tainá Guarda and Sarita Subraminian, “How Would the New Limits to Class Sizes Affect New York City Schools?” (New York: New York City Independent Budget Office, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Chingos, Ariella Meltzer, and James Carter, “How Will Implementing Class Size Caps in New York City Affect Funding Equity?” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Jepsen and Rivkin, “Class Size Reduction and Student Achievement.”

<sup>11</sup> Alex Zimmerman, “Betty Rosa, New York’s Top Education Official, Raises Equity Concerns Over Class Size Law,” Chalkbeat New York, August 17, 2023, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2023/8/17/23836370/new-york-class-size-law-commissioner-betty-rosa-equity-implications/>.

<sup>12</sup> Chingos, Meltzer, and Carter, “How Will Implementing Class Size Caps in New York City Affect Funding Equity?”

likely fund implementation through an equitable formula like Fair Student Funding, which supports all schools based on student needs rather than targeting dollars to lower-need schools with bigger class sizes.

One simple reform that could reduce implementation costs would be for the state to allow modestly larger class size caps in classes with two teachers, such as integrated co-teaching classrooms that serve a mix of regular and special education students. My colleagues' and my work estimates that increasing the caps in these classes by 25 percent would cut the cost of implementing the law by more than half.<sup>13</sup>

NYCPS is more limited in its ability to mitigate the inequitable impacts of the class size law, but several implementation strategies could reduce the harm caused.

First, NYCPS should reduce class sizes in the highest-need schools before reducing class size anywhere else, going further than the law's requirement to prioritize schools with higher poverty levels. Any funding designated for class-size reduction should first flow to the schools with the greatest needs, so they do not have to reduce other necessary student supports in order to reduce class size. This will also allow higher-need schools to hire new teachers before new positions at lower-need schools become available.

Second, the city should provide as much additional funding to NYCPS as possible with the expectation that it is distributed equitably, such as through Fair Student Funding or a similar student-need-based formula. This approach would reduce the pressure on the highest-need schools to cut other critical student supports while expecting lower-need schools to fund new teaching positions out of existing budgets.

Finally, as the class size law is implemented, NYCPS should collect and publish a rich dataset to inform decisionmaking by policymakers, educators, and the public. These data should include not just information on compliance with the law, but which services, programs, and positions are being cut to free up resources for class size reduction; the credentials, characteristics, and performance ratings of teachers hired to staff the new classes; and any information on how student outcomes (including test scores, attendance, and other measures captured by the district) change as class sizes are reduced.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony. Do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

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<sup>13</sup> Chingos, Meltzer, and Carter, "How Will Implementing Class Size Caps in New York City Affect Funding Equity?"