

POLICY AND PROGRAM STUDIES SERVICE REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

A Descriptive Evaluation of the Federal Class-Size Reduction Program

BACKGROUND

The federal Class-Size Reduction (CSR) Program, PL 105-277, begun in Fiscal Year 1999, helped school districts hire additional qualified teachers, especially in the early elementary grades, so children would learn in smaller classes. The CSR program also allowed funds to be spent for professional development, in part to help teachers take advantage of instructional opportunities in smaller classes. The ultimate goal of the program was to improve student achievement, particularly in reading, by reducing class size in grades K-3 to 18 students.

As part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), the CSR program was folded into Title II, Part A of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Although no longer a separate federal program, class-size reduction remains an allowable use of funds under Title II, Part A. Therefore, this evaluation provides valuable lessons not just about the federal CSR program, but also about a major component of Title II, Part A of NCLB.

The evaluation was designed to address multiple research questions, organized into three main categories: (1) distribution and uses of federal CSR funds; (2) implementation of CSR; (3) and effects of CSR on class size. This evaluation was not intended to provide data on the effects of CSR on classroom practices or student achievement.

The evaluation used mixed data collection methods. Surveys of district staff and school principals provided generalizable information about the federal CSR program, while site visits to six states, 12 districts (two in each state), 24 schools (two in each district), and 48 CSR classrooms (two from each school) provided qualitative information that illuminated and helped verify the survey findings. The surveys and site visits were conducted in the spring of 2001, during the federal CSR program's second year of funding, and most data correspond to the 2000-2001 school year.

KEY FINDINGS:

Distribution and Uses of Funds

- In 2000-2001, about 25,000 teachers were hired with federal CSR funds. Ninety-four percent were regular classroom teachers rather than specialist teachers. Schools with the largest class sizes in their district were typically the recipients of the federally funded CSR teachers. Sixty percent of schools hired one teacher, 30 percent hired two teachers, and 10 percent hired more than two teachers.

- In keeping with the law's explicit intent, two-thirds of all districts coordinated federal CSR funding with other funding sources, including funds from Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Title II of the Higher Education Act, as well as state and local CSR initiatives. When districts received state or local CSR funds, those funds were typically five times the size of the federal CSR allocation but often came with more strings attached, such as restricting funding to teachers in separate classrooms.
- Although only 1 percent of the teachers hired with federal CSR funds were special education teachers, 16 percent of districts reported coordinating their CSR program with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The study did not explore how these programs were coordinated. In addition, sixty-nine percent of the districts offering professional development with CSR funds reported including special education teachers in this professional development. It is not clear why the professional development was not offered to special education teachers in every district.

Implementation

- Recruiting and hiring fully certified teachers was a problem in almost one-third of large districts, and in 10 percent of smaller districts. Many large districts were engaged in large-scale recruitment initiatives (often with different funding sources), but a lack of credentialed applicants was a major problem (and more of a problem than non-competitive salaries or single year funding). In 40 percent of all districts, over 50 percent of the new hires were novice teachers.
- Although permitted to use up to 15 percent of federal CSR funds in 1999-2000 for professional development, and up to 25 percent in 2000-2001 and 2001-2002, districts spent an average of 13 percent in 1999-2000 and 14 percent in 2000-2001. Only 39 percent of districts chose to spend CSR funds on that activity. According to district personnel, the professional development offered typically focused on reading (80 percent of districts) and/or math (57 percent) rather than on instructional strategies to optimize the use of small class size (38 percent). In lieu of professional development, districts used funds to hire teachers to reduce class size.
- Just as large districts had trouble finding qualified teachers, they also were more likely than smaller districts to have shortages of space. Almost 60 percent of large districts reported facilities problems, typically not enough additional rooms and insufficient funds to modify existing facilities. In response, districts promoted team teaching or converted non-classroom space (other instructional rooms like gymnasiums, or non-instructional rooms like teachers' lounges) into classrooms. Overall, 42 percent of the schools that hired CSR teachers did not place them in self-contained classrooms.
- CSR implementation was affected by other administrative and resource-related issues: the lack of state administrative funds resulted in minimal state involvement in

the program; districts were unable to hire teachers due to the late notification of the availability of funds; district administrators were wary about the uncertainty of the program's future; and allocations for rural districts were too small to create a meaningful program.

- Based upon observations in 48 CSR classrooms in 24 schools, some teachers took advantage of smaller classes to tailor instruction and maximize one-on-one time with students, giving students more time and attention. At the same time, other CSR classes functioned like non-CSR classes, with desks in rows and the teacher lecturing from the front of the room.

Changes in Class Size

- In the schools and grades where federally funded CSR teachers were placed, average class size decreased with the advent of federal CSR funds, typically by one or two students. After the federal CSR program, overall average class size ranged from 18 students per class in kindergarten, to 20 in grade 1 and 21 students per class in grades 2 and 3. There are two reasons for the modest reduction in average class size. Many schools (44 percent) did not assign the CSR teacher to a separate classroom, but rather assigned the teacher to special subjects or team teaching. Even in schools where teachers were assigned to their own classrooms, 52 percent had simultaneous increases in enrollment that mitigated class size reduction. Overall, 73 percent of schools either did not assign teachers to separate classes or had enrollment increases that reduced CSR's impact.

This report is available online at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/ppss/reports.html>.