

Twelve Ways to Improve Learning

Decrease Class Sizes

Definition and Source

Average class size is measured by dividing the enrollment of a grade by the number of classes for that grade. High school class sizes divide enrollment by the number of classes in all subject areas. For high schools and sixth grade, an average for the second and fifth class periods is used. Data are reported for the first school day in May 2000 and 2003 and are from the Illinois State Board of Education.

Trends and Key Findings

In most Illinois schools, elementary and high school classes are significantly smaller than middle-grade classes. Statewide, class sizes remained virtually the same from the 1999-00 to 2002-03 academic years, averaging 21.3 students in first grade, 23.6 students in sixth grade and 17.6 students in high school in 2002-03. Counties with the smallest class sizes are mostly in rural areas, while the biggest class sizes were primarily in the northern section of the state, often in urban or suburban areas.

Research has shown the benefits of a class size of no more than 20 students, with a goal of 15, in the early elementary school grades: better academic habits, higher reading scores and an overall improved learning environment.¹ Smaller sizes are especially crucial in kindergarten through third grade because teachers can provide individual attention and are more likely to catch – and address – learning problems early in a child’s educational career.

Twenty-eight Illinois counties have first-grade classes averaging more than 20.0 students. Most counties saw first-grade class sizes drop or hold steady from 1999-00 to 2002-03. But 10 counties – Calhoun, Fayette, Fulton, Iroquois, Jersey, Jo Daviess, Pope, Schuyler, Scott and White – saw first-grade classes grow by 10 percent or more.

¹ University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) Program (information available at www.uwm.edu/Dept/CERA/sage.html)

AVERAGE CLASS SIZE

	FIRST GRADE			SIXTH GRADE			HIGH SCHOOL		
	1999-00	2002-03	% change	1999-00	2002-03	% change	1999-00	2002-03	% change
Illinois	21.6	21.3	-1.4	23.9	23.6	-1.3	18.4	17.6	-4.3
Adams	18.3	18.1	-1.1	24.4	21.2	-13.1	14.2	14.9	4.9
Alexander	21.0	20.6	-1.9	21.2	16.9	-20.3	13.7	13.3	-2.9
Bond	20.3	19.3	-4.9	19.5	23.2	19.0	15.5	17.0	9.7
Boone	23.6	22.3	-5.5	27.0	27.1	0.4	18.4	22.5	22.3
Brown	16.7	16.7	0.0	22.5	18.0	-20.0	17.0	15.4	-9.4
Bureau	15.3	16.1	5.2	22.2	19.1	-14.0	17.9	16.3	-8.9
Calhoun	12.7	17.0	33.9	17.8	18.3	2.8	14.0	12.9	-7.9
Carroll	18.5	19.3	4.3	23.8	20.3	-14.7	16.0	16.4	2.5
Cass	17.8	15.6	-12.4	19.0	19.3	1.6	12.6	16.8	33.3
Champaign	20.0	20.0	0.0	23.7	20.7	-12.7	18.2	20.3	11.5
Christian	18.0	18.3	1.7	21.5	16.4	-23.7	14.6	15.4	5.5
Clark	18.3	19.0	3.8	24.1	26.6	10.4	15.8	15.5	-1.9
Clay	17.5	16.6	-5.1	21.1	20.1	-4.7	14.2	15.1	6.3
Clinton	19.8	18.0	-9.1	22.4	22.7	1.3	16.6	16.5	-0.6
Coles	19.2	20.5	6.8	21.9	20.2	-7.8	15.9	15.6	-1.9
Cook	21.0	20.9	-0.5	23.8	23.0	-3.4	19.9	19.4	-2.5
Crawford	18.1	19.4	7.2	22.3	16.8	-24.7	14.7	17.8	21.1
Cumberland	19.6	20.7	5.6	22.0	18.5	-15.9	17.2	16.8	-2.3
De Kalb	19.2	20.5	6.8	25.9	26.0	0.4	18.7	18.2	-2.7
De Witt	21.6	16.7	-22.7	19.2	24.5	27.6	15.4	15.0	-2.6
Douglas	16.8	16.2	-3.6	19.8	21.3	7.6	15.6	14.3	-8.3
Du Page	21.9	22.4	2.3	25.4	24.7	-2.8	22.0	22.2	0.9
Edgar	20.1	18.7	-7.0	15.9	20.4	28.3	13.8	16.8	21.7
Edwards	16.8	18.0	7.1	23.7	24.6	3.8	18.5	18.3	-1.1
Effingham	17.4	18.2	4.6	21.8	21.4	-1.8	18.0	18.0	0.0
Fayette	17.1	19.4	13.5	25.3	23.5	-7.1	14.1	14.8	5.0
Ford	18.6	19.1	2.7	21.5	19.1	-11.2	13.9	15.7	12.9
Franklin	19.7	20.2	2.5	23.4	19.6	-16.2	13.8	16.6	20.3
Fulton	17.4	19.6	12.6	20.6	20.5	-0.5	15.5	14.7	-5.2
Gallatin	21.5	18.3	-14.9	17.7	22.3	26.0	16.1	12.8	-20.5
Greene	18.6	18.5	-0.5	21.0	15.7	-25.2	13.0	14.3	10.0
Grundy	19.1	19.3	1.0	23.5	20.9	-11.1	17.1	18.4	7.6
Hamilton	20.2	18.2	-9.9	20.2	19.6	-3.0	18.7	17.0	-9.1
Hancock	16.1	13.1	-18.6	21.0	17.2	-18.1	13.6	14.8	8.8
Hardin	22.5	20.3	-9.8	25.5	30.0	17.6	15.9	15.0	-5.7
Henderson	18.2	18.8	3.3	17.5	21.0	20.0	15.9	13.4	-15.7
Henry	19.8	19.1	-3.5	20.1	20.4	1.5	17.2	17.9	4.1
Iroquois	17.0	19.3	13.5	21.0	20.9	-0.5	13.9	13.6	-2.2
Jackson	18.2	18.3	0.5	21.5	21.3	-0.9	17.6	15.6	-11.4
Jasper	18.2	16.6	-8.8	18.9	19.0	0.5	23.2	17.4	-25.0
Jefferson	18.2	17.5	-3.8	21.0	23.3	11.0	17.0	16.8	-1.2
Jersey	18.8	21.2	12.8	24.1	23.3	-3.3	19.9	20.4	2.5
Jo Daviess	17.2	20.9	21.5	21.5	21.2	-1.4	14.8	13.8	-6.8
Johnson	18.3	14.6	-20.2	21.0	21.9	4.3	16.3	13.8	-15.3
Kane	22.0	23.2	5.5	26.1	25.1	-3.8	20.4	21.1	3.4
Kankakee	20.8	20.4	-1.9	22.6	23.6	4.4	18.8	18.3	-2.7
Kendall	22.1	22.7	2.7	25.3	22.3	-11.9	20.1	20.0	-0.5
Knox	19.3	16.5	-14.5	18.5	19.7	6.5	16.4	16.7	1.8
Lake	22.6	22.0	-2.7	23.4	22.5	-3.8	18.8	21.1	12.2
La Salle	17.7	18.4	4.0	19.7	20.5	4.1	16.7	18.7	12.0
Lawrence	17.6	16.3	-7.4	25.1	20.7	-17.5	12.6	15.7	24.6

AVERAGE CLASS SIZE

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	1999-00	2002-03	% change	1999-00	2002-03	% change	1999-00	2002-03	% change
Lee	15.4	15.2	-1.3	20.6	20.7	0.5	16.2	19.4	19.8
Livingston	18.3	16.7	-8.7	21.1	20.2	-4.3	15.8	17.1	8.2
Logan	16.4	15.7	-4.3	18.2	17.7	-2.7	16.4	17.4	6.1
Macon	21.4	21.3	-0.5	24.6	23.6	-4.1	17.5	20.0	14.3
Macoupin	18.1	18.8	3.9	22.6	21.6	-4.4	16.7	16.7	0.0
Madison	20.2	21.0	4.0	24.4	23.9	-2.0	19.1	20.3	6.3
Marion	19.5	18.1	-7.2	23.2	22.6	-2.6	16.0	17.2	7.5
Marshall	17.4	14.7	-15.5	21.4	19.0	-11.2	15.0	13.0	-13.3
Mason	18.3	17.5	-4.4	19.8	19.7	-0.5	15.6	15.2	-2.6
Massac	22.6	18.6	-17.7	22.3	21.0	-5.8	12.2	13.8	13.1
McDonough	18.6	17.4	-6.5	16.6	20.3	22.3	16.0	13.9	-13.1
McHenry	23.2	21.8	-6.0	26.5	26.5	0.0	18.9	20.0	5.8
McLean	19.4	19.2	-1.0	22.8	23.0	0.9	18.4	20.9	13.6
Menard	20.2	19.9	-1.5	23.5	23.3	-0.9	17.6	16.9	-4.0
Mercer	16.3	14.5	-11.0	17.0	14.5	-14.7	16.8	17.1	1.8
Monroe	18.5	19.7	6.5	24.2	23.5	-2.9	19.7	16.6	-15.7
Montgomery	21.7	21.2	-2.3	21.8	23.3	6.9	16.0	15.0	-6.3
Morgan	17.5	17.3	-1.1	21.0	20.0	-4.8	12.2	12.5	2.5
Moultrie	17.5	16.8	-4.0	21.9	18.8	-14.2	12.9	14.9	15.5
Ogle	20.5	18.8	-8.3	22.9	23.5	2.6	17.1	19.9	16.4
Peoria	18.1	18.7	3.3	21.6	20.1	-6.9	14.8	17.8	20.3
Perry	19.4	19.8	2.1	23.3	23.4	0.4	16.6	17.7	6.6
Piatt	18.9	17.6	-6.9	22.6	16.5	-27.0	15.7	16.2	3.2
Pike	21.5	16.9	-21.4	16.9	17.9	5.9	13.2	13.2	0.0
Pope	13.0	21.0	61.5	23.5	22.0	-6.4	10.8	17.6	63.0
Pulaski	17.0	15.6	-8.2	18.8	18.5	-1.6	11.7	11.9	1.7
Putnam	23.0	23.3	1.3	29.0	23.2	-20.0	17.4	17.1	-1.7
Randolph	17.3	17.9	3.5	21.2	19.6	-7.5	15.7	15.7	0.0
Richland	21.9	19.6	-10.5	23.9	21.3	-10.9	14.9	18.5	24.2
Rock Island	19.0	18.6	-2.1	23.2	21.5	-7.3	19.4	20.5	5.7
St. Clair	21.5	21.5	0.0	24.4	23.9	-2.0	18.6	20.1	8.1
Saline	18.0	18.5	2.8	22.0	22.1	0.5	15.5	18.3	18.1
Sangamon	18.9	18.5	-2.1	24.3	23.1	-4.9	19.0	17.9	-5.8
Schuyler	19.5	23.7	21.5	31.0	23.5	-24.2	20.1	18.9	-6.0
Scott	25.0	27.7	10.8	24.7	22.7	-8.1	11.0	10.9	-0.9
Shelby	16.6	18.0	8.4	20.0	22.1	10.5	16.1	16.1	0.0
Stark	14.3	14.0	-2.1	14.1	14.5	2.8	13.0	12.9	-0.8
Stephenson	19.2	16.1	-16.1	22.2	22.5	1.4	15.5	14.6	-5.8
Tazewell	20.2	20.2	0.0	22.8	22.1	-3.1	19.0	18.5	-2.6
Union	22.1	17.3	-21.7	21.1	25.2	19.4	16.4	17.7	7.9
Vermilion	19.8	18.1	-8.6	21.3	23.9	12.2	14.6	15.0	2.7
Wabash	22.0	18.4	-16.4	23.7	20.7	-12.7	16.9	18.2	7.7
Warren	16.7	16.7	0.0	17.1	17.9	4.7	15.4	13.4	-13.0
Washington	17.5	17.2	-1.7	21.9	22.3	1.8	17.4	12.1	-30.5
Wayne	17.6	17.2	-2.3	19.9	18.0	-9.5	15.5	13.8	-11.0
White	14.5	16.4	13.1	17.0	19.2	12.9	16.2	17.1	5.6
Whiteside	19.9	20.6	3.5	21.7	19.6	-9.7	18.1	17.5	-3.3
Will	22.8	22.4	-1.8	26.1	25.8	-1.1	20.5	22.6	10.2
Williamson	20.7	21.1	1.9	21.3	20.6	-3.3	12.8	14.6	14.1
Winnebago	20.3	21.0	3.4	24.1	20.6	-14.5	20.9	19.8	-5.3
Woodford	19.7	19.2	-2.5	22.1	22.2	0.5	17.1	18.6	8.8
Chicago	25.1	24.0	-4.4	25.0	26.2	4.8	18.3	11.8	-35.5

Action Steps

Students receive more personalized attention in smaller classes because teachers can focus on individual learning styles and adapt lessons to meet each child's. Class size is an indicator of other aspects of school quality, such as the amount of funding; schools faced with a lack of funds may increase the number of students in a class because they cannot hire additional teachers. Funding difficulties are forcing many schools across Illinois – in city, suburban and rural districts – to make tough decisions that compromise the quality of education such as increasing class sizes, laying off teachers and more.

The A+ Illinois campaign – a statewide coalition of diverse, influential groups – is working toward meaningful reform in the funding and quality of public education (learn more at www.aplusillinois.org). A+ Illinois advocates a comprehensive restructuring of state finances to improve funding for education and the human services that support children and families. As a leader of A+ Illinois, Voices recommends the following action steps:

- Address inequalities in school funding to provide more resources to better balance class sizes. Reduce schools' reliance on property taxes by increasing revenue from other, fairer sources, including income and sales taxes. This approach should “bring the bottom up” and not take away resources from higher-spending districts.
- Increase the minimum per-pupil funding level to the recommended \$6,000 that's needed to provide an adequate education. Also, guarantee additional funds to address particular needs of low-income schoolchildren.

School Funding Reform Can Help Reduce Class Sizes in Less-Affluent Districts

By Dr. Suellen Girard, Superintendent
Havana Community Unit School District 126

In today's time of tight budgets, it is important to invest in education wisely to make the most of scarce dollars. This necessitates making choices. For this reason, policymakers need to know which factors make the most difference in increasing student achievement. Class size is one of those factors.

What is class size? Class size is the number of children in a classroom divided by the number of teachers (not including aides) in that classroom. Because 75 percent to 80 percent of a school budget is spent on personnel, class size is debated on a regular basis. The smaller the class size, the more it costs per pupil to run a program. Small classes have less than 20 students per teacher. Recently, as school districts have struggled with budgets, class sizes have begun to increase.

Who benefits from small class sizes? It would be nice to have small classes for all students (K-12), but that is not always possible. Small classes do not have the same impact with all groups and ages of children. Understanding this helps to place teachers where it makes the most difference for children. Research has shown that:

- Young children (preKindergarten through third grade) show greater achievement gains in reading and math when classes are less than 20.¹ The research is less conclusive with older students.²

- Minority students and students living in poverty show larger gains from small class sizes than children from more affluent backgrounds.^{3, 4}

Recommendations for Illinois: Class sizes for preK-grade 3 need to be less than 20 in schools serving poor and minority students. School funding reform will be required to accomplish this because school funding is largely based on local taxes. Less than 40 percent of the cost of education is being paid by the state, and Illinois was the only state given an "F" for funding equity by Education Week in 2003. We need to actively support school funding reform to shift the cost of education from a local property tax base to the state. More equitable and adequate funding levels will allow less-affluent school districts to reduce class size for their youngest students.

In today's time of tight budgets, it is important to invest in education wisely to make the most of scarce dollars. This necessitates making choices.



Dr. Suellen Girard (above) has been superintendent of Havana Community Unit School District 126 for one year. Prior to her current position, Girard served as assistant superintendent for instruction in Jacksonville and curriculum coordinator for SD 126. She also was a kindergarten teacher, taught early childhood education courses at the college level and ran a private preschool. Havana is located on the Illinois River between Peoria and Springfield. It is a rural district and serves approximately 1,200 students.

- ¹ Robinson, G.E. (1990) Synthesis of research on the effects of class size. *Educational Leadership*, 47(7), 80-90.
- ² U.S. Dept. of Education. (1998) *Reducing Class size: What do we know?* Washington, DC: Author. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 420 108)
- ³ Glass, G.V. & Smith, M.L. (1978) *Meta-analysis of research on the relationship of class-size and achievement: The class size instruction project.* San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 168 129)
- ⁴ "Summary of Recent Class-size Research with an Emphasis on Tennessee's Project STAR and its Derivative Studies," by C.M. Achilles, 1996. Available from Center of Excellence for Research and Policy in Basic Skills, Tennessee State University, or by calling 615-963-7231.