



Class sizes in Ontario schools

The effects of provincial class size policy on Ontario's elementary and secondary schools

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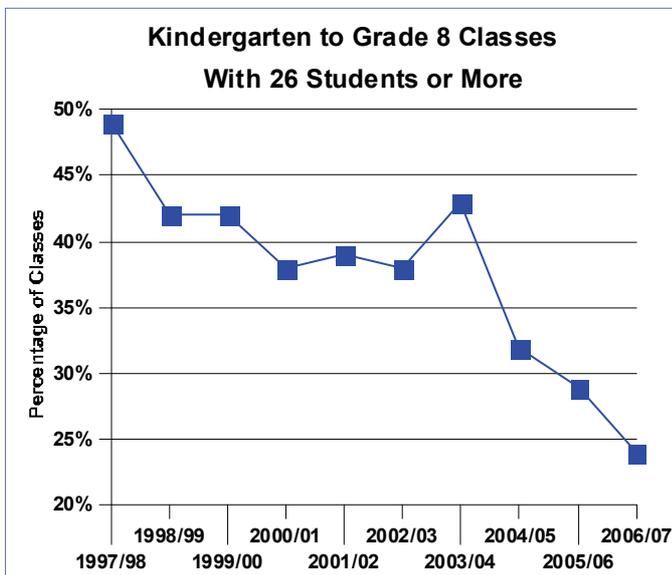
CLASS SIZES IN ONTARIO SCHOOLS

Class size has been the object of extensive debate in recent years. Some researchers argue that class size has little effect on student achievement, while others feel that class size – particularly in the early grades and particularly for students who are “educationally disadvantaged” – makes a significant difference to students’ chances for success in school.

In Ontario, recent changes to government policy and targeted funding have had a considerable impact on class sizes in elementary schools. Though there remains a wide range of class sizes across the province, 98% of Ontario’s Kindergarten to Grade 3 classes now have 25 students or fewer.

But many boards are struggling to meet the province’s cap of 20 students or fewer for all primary grades. It may be time to make the provincial policy more flexible and allow boards to provide the smallest classes in the areas where they will have the largest impact, and allow schools some flexibility to ensure there is not a dramatic increase in multi-grade or split classes.

Overall class sizes in elementary schools in 2007:



- 76% of Kindergarten to Grade 8 classes had 25 students or fewer, compared to 51% in 1997/98;
- 20% of classes had 26 to 30 students, compared to 36% in 1997/98; and
- 4% of classes had 31 or more students, compared to 13% in 1997/98.

Kindergarten to Grade 3 Class Sizes

In 2004/05, the Ministry of Education introduced funding to reduce class sizes in the primary grades. The goal of the funding was to ensure that by 2007/08, no primary class had more than 20 students.

In 2006, the Ministry of Education amended the policy slightly. Boards will now be considered compliant if 90% of their primary classes have 20 students or fewer and up to 10 per cent have up to 23 students. The new policy also stated that it is “expected that boards will achieve compliance while ensuring that average class size in the other elementary grades (4 to 8) does not increase.”

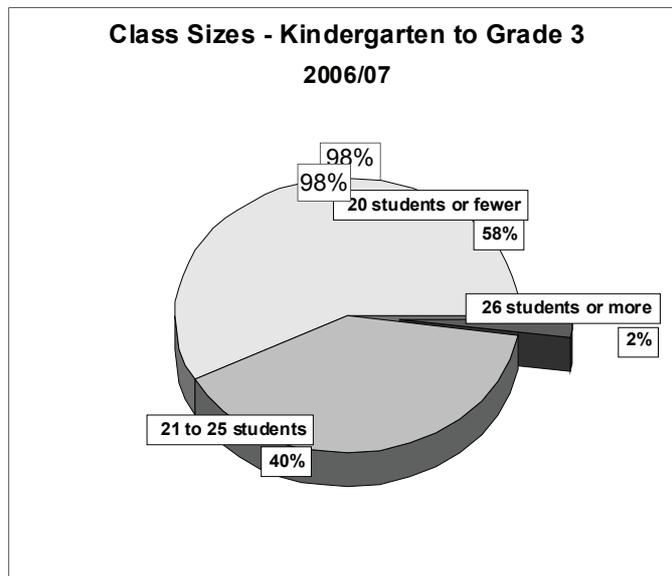
This year, 98% of Kindergarten to Grade 3 classes have 25 students or fewer. While this is not within the Ministry’s 20-student cap, it is a significant improvement in the last three years. But, even with increased funding, it will be very difficult for boards to meet the Ministry target by the fall of 2007.

The cap on primary class size is terrific but to keep spending in check, it should be kept as a “soft” rather than “hard cap”. This would also give schools greater flexibility with their organizations. And it would help to negate potential staff morale difficulties between junior and primary teachers.

JK to Grade 6 elementary school
Waterloo Region

Kindergarten to Grade 3 classes in 2006/07:

- 58% of primary classes had 20 students or fewer, a substantial increase from 36% in 2004/05;
- 40% of primary classes had between 21 and 25 students, compared to 53% of classes in 2004/05; and
- Only 2% of primary classes had 26 students or more, a significant improvement from 11% in 2004/05.



Split Classes

One of the unintended consequences of hard caps on class size has been an increase in the number of split grades. This is particularly true in small schools and in schools with specialized programs, such as French Immersion.

- Province-wide, the percentage of classes with 3 or more grades has risen from 5% in 2006, to 8% this year.
- In northern schools, which are on average much smaller than schools in the rest of the province, the percentage of split classes with 3 or more grades has nearly doubled – from 12% in 2006, to 23% this year.

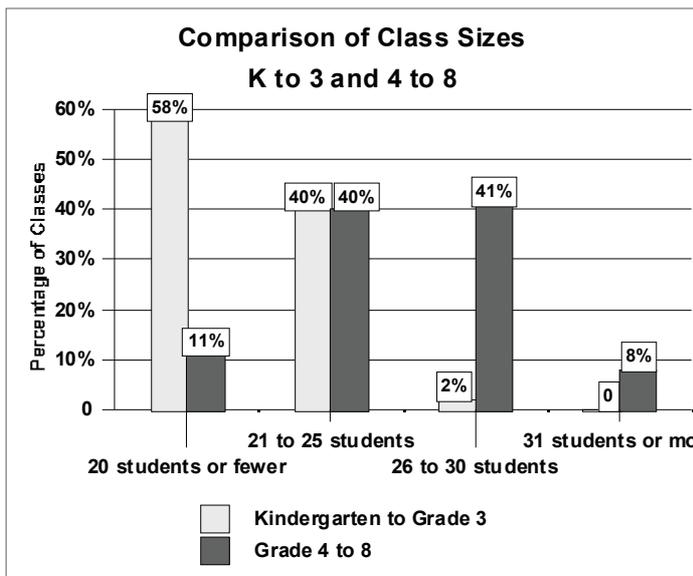
We would love to take advantage of class size reduction initiatives, but have absolutely no space for an additional classroom. We'll require additional portables to meet Ministry requirements for next year.

JK to Grade 5 elementary school Peel

Grades 4 to 8

Parents have been concerned that reductions in primary class sizes will result in increases in class sizes in grades 4 to 8. Though there is a substantial difference between primary class sizes and those in junior and senior grades, there is no overall evidence of increased class sizes in grades 4 to 8. Only in Eastern Ontario, which includes the Ottawa-Carleton school boards, has there been an increase this year in the number of 4 to 8 classes with 26 students or more.

Class sizes in Grades 4 to 8 in 2007:



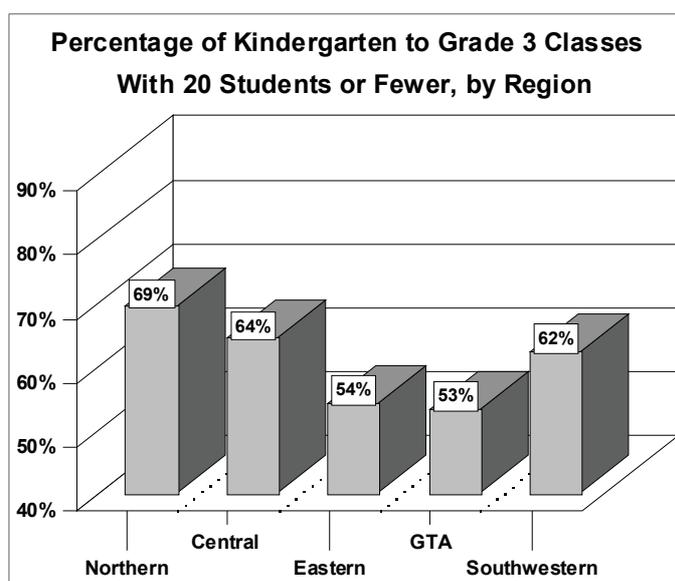
- 11% of classes had 20 students or fewer, compared to 10% in the previous two years;
- 40% of classes had 21 to 25 students, compared to 35% in 2004/05;
- 41% of classes had 26 to 30 students, compared to 47% in 2004/05; and
- 8% had 31 students or more, unchanged over the last two years.

Regional Variations

There are wide variations in class sizes across the province. These variations reflect regional factors. Regions with lower enrolment are more likely to have smaller class sizes in the primary grades. Regions which had the vast majority of their primary classes above the planned cap in 2004 have had to make substantial changes to meet the government's target.

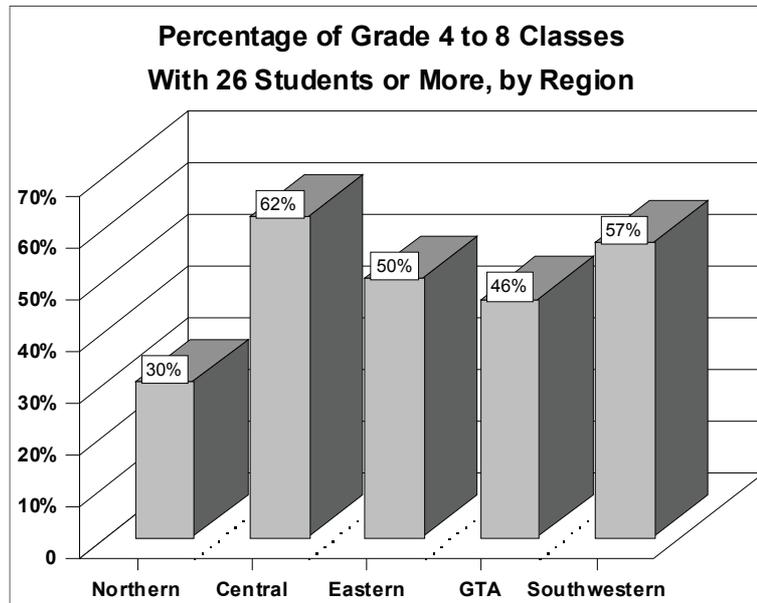
Changes in percentage of primary classes at or under 20 students				
	2004/05		2006/07	% change
Northern	56%	→	69%	+ 23%
Central	40%	→	64%	+ 60%
Eastern	39%	→	54%	+ 38%
GTA	26%	→	53%	+ 104%
Southwestern	37%	→	62%	+ 68%

In areas like the Greater Toronto Area, which includes the Toronto school boards, York, Durham, Halton, Dufferin and Peel, a number of factors come into play. In boards with growing populations it has been difficult to



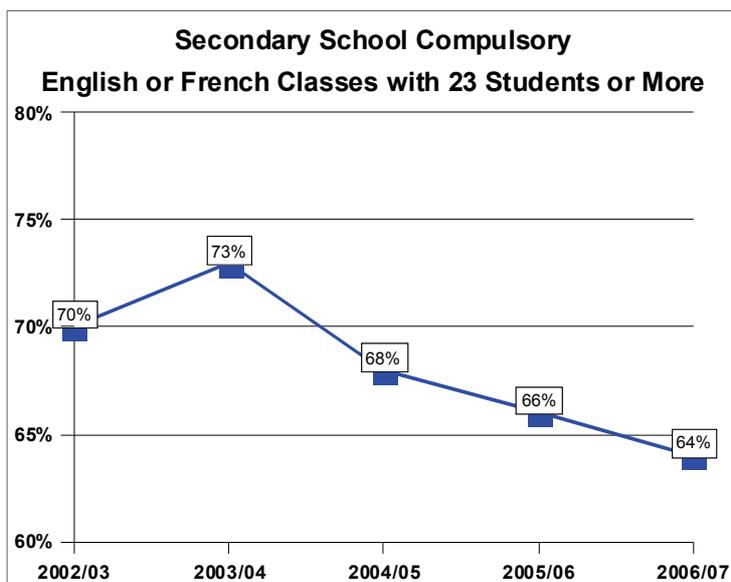
provide the classroom space required to accommodate the increased number of primary classes. In the Toronto boards, there may be some empty space, but not necessarily in the schools where more classes are required.

There are also regional variations in the size of classes in grades 4 to 8.



Class Sizes in Secondary Schools

In secondary school, People for Education tracks only classes that every student must take in every grade. In English-language boards, participants report on the sizes of core English classes, and in French-language schools they report on core French classes.



Since 2000/01, there have been gradual reductions in the size of these classes across the province.

Research on Class Size

“By 2007-08, at any given time, the numbers of students in primary classes will be 20 students, nine times out of 10. Exceptions will only be allowed in the remaining 10 per cent of classes. Up to three additional students will be allowed as a result of enrolment changes to minimize the number of split grades and avoid unnecessary transportation of students.”

Premier Dalton McGuinty

The reduction of class size has drawn conflicting views among pedagogical researchers. The impact of class size on student achievement has been weighed against the cost of staffing smaller classes, or spending educational dollars in other areas, such as remedial support.

The Canadian Council on Learning has written that smaller class sizes have greatest benefit in the primary grades, but also cautions that class sizes should be reduced carefully, monitored, and that the cost benefit ratios be determined.

The C.D. Howe Institute concludes that “Because reducing class size is enormously expensive, it is very likely that the money being spent there could be better spent on other educational policies, such as continuous teacher training, which, unlike class size reduction, have been shown to improve student performance.”

In a brief on class size, The Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (SAEE) emphasized that flexibility be integral to class size reduction to “suit emerging needs”, and that additional classroom space must be factored into the reductions.

There is, however, significant agreement that the benefits of small classes are greatest for students who have faced educational disadvantages, and that these gains are long-term in their effect, and carry on to upper grades and beyond.

Conclusion

In only three years, provincial policy on primary class size has had a substantial impact. But it is important now to weigh the costs and the benefits of moving to a hard cap by the fall of 2007.

The class size policy has cost \$90 million per year over the last three years. It will require a significant increase in class size funding for the coming school year, if the province is to reach its target of 90% of primary classes at 20 students or fewer. And there are many other demands on provincial education funding.

The re-organization necessary to produce a hard cap on class sizes has also been difficult to manage for many boards. In areas of high growth such as Halton, Peel and York Region, boards have had to provide new space for the extra classes—space which is currently at a premium in those areas. In boards with low or declining enrolment the new policy has often resulted in an increase in split classes.

Research on class size shows that it is important to weigh the costs of overall reductions in class size against the potential benefits of other uses for the funding, such as full-day kindergarten, technology and arts programs, early literacy programs or flexible funding that allows boards to provide very small classes for students at greater risk because of their socio-economic status.

The Canadian Council on Learning, in its report on class size, recommends that governments monitor the impact of lower class sizes to determine the effect on student success and to determine the cost benefit.

Reducing class sizes in the early grades was an election promise of the current government. As we can see, that promise has been kept. Class sizes are lower overall, and much lower in the primary grades. It may be time to use the lessons learned over the last two years of implementing the new class size policy, and consider adjusting the “hard cap” policy to make it more flexible and more responsive to students’ needs.

Recommendations

We recommend that the province:

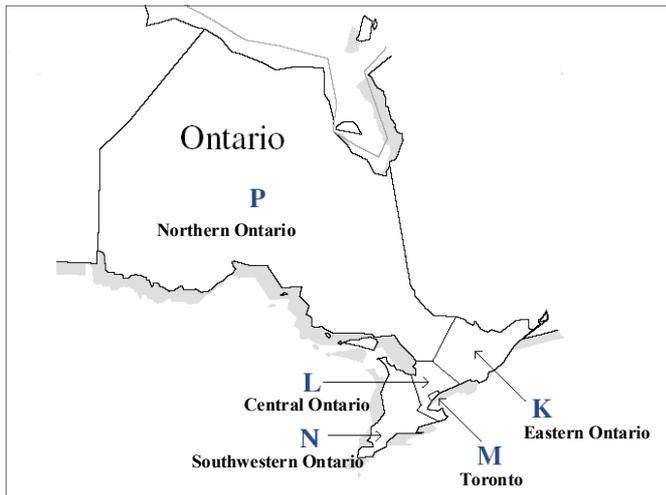
1. adjust the primary class size policy to allow more flexibility for boards and school principals to implement small classes in specific areas;
2. analyse the effects of the current reductions in class size on all aspects of student success, before moving forward with the implementation of a hard cap;
3. amend the funding formula to ensure that funding for school operations and maintenance matches the actual costs;
4. amend the funding formula to ensure that funding for non-teaching salaries more closely matches the amounts boards actually pay;
5. reinstate the Local Priorities Grant to allow boards more flexibility to target funding to areas of high need;
6. re-evaluate and adequately fund the Learning Opportunities Grant which some boards used to cover the costs of smaller class sizes in high needs areas and full-day kindergarten for students who may not start Grade 1 ready to learn.

Methodology

Every year People for Education conducts a survey of resources in Ontario schools. Surveys were mailed with an explanatory letter to every Ontario elementary and secondary school in October 2006. Translated surveys were sent to French-language schools. Responses were returned by fax or mail between October 2006 and February 2007.

The results were compiled. Only compiled data is released. This year's sample of 956 schools equals 20% of the province's elementary and secondary schools.

Fifty-seven per cent of schools in the sample participated last year.



Schools were sorted according to their postal codes into geographic regions. Eighteen per cent of schools were located in the K postal code region, 23% were located in the L postal code region, 18% were located in the M postal code region, 22% were located in the N postal code region and 18% were located in the P postal code region.

For the purpose of regional comparisons, we sorted schools into the regional area of Greater Toronto. The Greater Toronto Area includes all the schools in Toronto (M postal code) and schools in the Regional Municipalities of Durham, Peel, Halton and York (all part of the L postal code). The Central Region in the report includes all the schools in the L postal code, less the schools in the Greater Toronto Area.

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