

The Elixir of Class Size

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Bill Clinton has proposed to shrink class sizes in the early grades by hiring 100,000 more teachers at a cost of \$12 billion over seven years. This is quintessential Clintonism — a warm Labrador puppy of a policy notion, petted by teachers and parents alike, but destined to bite when it grows up.

Why this lemming-like rush off the class-size cliff? Parents simply take it for granted that smaller classes mean better education. Teachers cheer because their jobs get easier with fewer students. Unions get more members. Administrators get more staff.

Smaller classes are a pollster's delight. But this plan — and others like it — is bad for at least five reasons.

Students Don't Do Better

After surveying all the relevant research, economist Eric Hanushek of the University of Rochester concludes that “there is little systematic gain from general reduction in class size.” Besides, classes have been shrinking for decades with no commensurate gains in learning, although the cost has been immense. (No “reform” is more expensive than smaller classes.) The Asian lands that trounce us on international assessments have vastly larger classes, often 40 or 50 youngsters per teacher. Yes, there are one or two studies indicating that few *kindergarten* children in a classroom is linked with modest test-score gains. But put it this way. If smaller classes were a drug, the FDA would not let it onto the market.

Better Ways to Spend Money

\$1.7 billion a year would, for example, furnish \$4000 scholarships to 425,000 low-income children to escape from grim urban schools. That's equivalent to liberating every boy and girl in Washington, Baltimore and Philadelphia from the educational carnage that now surrounds them. Alternatively, such sums would pay for *all* current U.S. teachers to take more university

courses. The leading problem in many classrooms, after all, isn't the pupil bodycount. It's teachers who never mastered the content.

Teachers Have to be “Certified”

At first glance, “certified teachers” looks like another warm puppy of a policy. Who could want anything else? Yet in practically every state, the only way to get certified today is to take lots of “methods” courses in colleges of education, rather than immersing oneself in the subject to be taught. It's certification that blocks millions of able adults from teaching in public schools.

Another Permanent Program

Bringing 100,000 teachers onto direct federal support will create another permanent program, a virtual entitlement sure to grow over time. What happens in Year Eight, after Clinton's \$12 billion is spent? Easy. The program will be extended. Indeed, if 18 children per class is good, the next politician will claim that 16 must be better. The Clinton version is just a preview of coming attractions.

Worse-Off Needy Kids

When California shrank primary classes throughout the state, veteran teachers left inner-city schools in droves, lured by the higher pay and cushier working conditions of suburban systems that suddenly had openings.

President Clinton is not the only politician now eyeing this path to voters' hearts. Congressmen and senators on both sides of the aisle are hastening to craft their own reform measures. They like teachers — and puppies — too. Most teacher improvement packages lift their ideas from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, a private group that includes the heads of both national teacher unions and a blue-ribbon list of ed-school professors, deans and presidents. This crew contends that the central weakness in U.S. teacher training is that candidates don't spend

enough time in “professional development programs,” that states lack “professional standards” boards, that certification requirements need to be strengthened, and that all teacher training programs should jump through the same “accreditation” hoops.

The commission's recommendations boil down to teachers spending more time in ever-more-uniform education schools and barring the classroom door to everyone else.

If there's money burning to be spent, Congress should give it to states to underwrite novel approaches to the training, pay and licensing of teachers. Cajole the states to break the ed-school hammerlock, loosen the certification stranglehold, and blaze alternative paths into teaching so that well-educated liberal-arts graduates and experienced professionals can enter the classroom from many directions. States could also demand that all teachers — veterans and novices alike — master the subjects they are expected to teach — and hold them accountable for pupil achievement by scrapping tenure and substituting multi-year contracts that reward results and penalize failure.

Such suggestions lack the instant appeal of Clinton's new pooch. Unlike class-size reduction, which has no known enemies, serious attention to quality means attacking the school establishment's strongest redoubts: the unions, teacher colleges, state regulatory apparatuses, and the interlocking special-interest groups

It's much easier just to call for more adult bodies in the classroom. Schools won't improve. Kids won't learn more. But the politicians will score points with the public — and with the unions. We understand why Bill Clinton needs such points nowadays. But his proposal is really a dog of an idea.

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