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A STAR Story

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by AFT President Sandra Feldman
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Small classes in the primary grades pay big dividends throughout the school years.

If you've waited in a supermarket checkout line recently, you may have seen the racy tabloid *STAR*, with its lurid headlines about various celebrities. If you looked inside the paper, however, you probably found that the stories did not amount to much. A waste of time, at best. But there's a much bigger *STAR* story that will never make the headlines in a supermarket tabloid--or most national newspapers, for that matter. In fact, most people will probably never even hear about it, which is too bad because it is real news, and it could have an enormous impact on something we all care about--educating our young people.

I'm talking about the massive STAR (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio) research project in Tennessee. It has collected 14 years of data that prove conclusively that putting kids in small classes in their early years leads to higher achievement all the way through school--especially for poor, minority students (in this study, mainly African-American children).

A Great Experiment

STAR is not one of those studies that gives education research a bad name--the kind where someone gives 30 kids a test, asks their teacher about her philosophy of teaching, and comes to an impressive-sounding conclusion about why the kids succeeded (or failed). It was a carefully designed project involving 11,000 children in 42 school districts in Tennessee. Frederick Mosteller, an eminent Harvard professor of statistics, calls the study "one of the great experiments in education in U.S. History."

STAR researchers randomly assigned children who were entering kindergarten to classes of 15 students and classes of 25. (Even 25 probably sounds terrific to parents and teachers who are used to classes of 30 or 35 children.) The children stayed in these classes for four years--until the end of grade three--but researchers continued to chart and compare their progress. Last year, those same kindergarten kids graduated from high school.

The STAR findings clearly show that the benefits of small classes in the early years last all the way through school. Compared with students who spent their first four years in regular-sized classes, students from the small classes are

- More likely to graduate on schedule and less likely to drop out.
- More likely to have been enrolled in honors classes and to graduate in the top 10 percent of their class.
- More likely to take SAT or ACT exams, indicating that they plan to go on to college. Poor, minority students who began in the small classes are far more likely to take these tests (40 percent, compared with only 31 percent for minority students who were in regular-size classes all along). Furthermore, the black-white gap between students taking these

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black-white gap between students taking these exams is reduced by 56 percent for black students who began school in small classes!

And this is on top of earlier achievement, which was equally impressive. At the end of third grade, children from the small classes were four months ahead of other children in the study in reading and math. This accelerated growth continued to increase over the years. In fact, by the end of eighth grade, the small-class children were *over one year* ahead of students who had been in standard-size classes in mathematics, reading, and science.

Small Classes Beat Vouchers

So, with results like these, why aren't we making sure all our kids get the benefit of small classes in the early grades? Why are we still talking about experimenting with vouchers to see if they can do the job? We already have a comparison between vouchers and small classes, and the difference is clear: Small classes raise achievement while vouchers don't. Princeton professor Cecelia Rouse's study of elementary school students in Milwaukee found that children in small classes made "substantially faster" progress in reading than voucher students. For the \$25 million spent on vouchers to send a few kids to private school, Milwaukee could have lowered the class size for an additional 13,000 public school children.

What many teachers and parents have been saying for years is true: The STAR study in Tennessee proves that small classes in the early grades can help all our kids do better, and they should be provided in all our elementary schools.



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