

K-3 Class Size Drops, But 77,500 Children Still in Classes with Over 25 Students

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Early Grade Class Size by School District

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This month New York City's youngest public school students returned to classrooms with about three fewer children on average than those of a few years ago. Despite the reduction, average class sizes in kindergarten through third grade remain significantly above the city and state goal of lowering the average to 20 students per class. And over 1 out of 4 students in the early grades—some 77,500 youngsters—still attend classes with more than 25 children, according to a new analysis by IBO undertaken following separate requests by the *Daily News* and Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum.

In school year 1998-1999—before state and federal funding targeted at reducing class sizes in kindergarten through the third grade became available—the average class in those grades had 24.9 students. Last school year (2001-2002), the third year of the Department of Education's early grade class-size initiative, the average had been reduced to 22.1 students.

The additional state and federal money—largely used to hire new teachers—explains much of the reduction in the average class size. An overall decline in the number of students in the early grades by nearly 20,000 also contributed significantly.

Snapshot of Early Grade Changes			
	1998-1999	2001-2002	Change
Early Grade Enrollment	321,772	301,939	-19,833
Number of Classes	12,930	13,659	729
Average Class Size	24.9	22.1	-2.8
Enrollment/Capacity of Schools with Early Grades	101.8%	93.5%	-8.4%

SOURCES: IBO; Department of Education C-Form Audited Registers for Oct. 31, 1998 and Oct. 31, 2001; Enrollment, Capacity, and Utilization Reports for 2001-2002.

NOTES: Analysis excludes citywide special education classes, classes spanning more than one grade (bridges), classes with fewer than 5 or greater than 50 students, and classes identified as placeholders for long-term absentees. A small number of observations also were dropped due to incomplete data.

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While average class size declined in every community school district, the size of the reduction varied markedly from district to district, ranging from 5.7 students in District 5 (Central Harlem) to 0.8 in District 21 (Gravesend/Coney Island). Indeed, the differences in early grade average class sizes are now wider than they were three years ago. The differences result from factors such as the level of enrollment declines, the extent of overcrowding, and availability of unused space to create new classrooms—the state and federal programs provided no money to

build or expand schools—which vary greatly across the city. In some districts, the opening of new schools also contributed to the reduction.

Funding to reduce class size. In recent years education advocates have made reducing class sizes, particularly in the early grades, a primary policy objective. The federal government and states such as New York responded with funding initiatives to hire the new teachers needed to create new classes in order to reduce class sizes. (A school with 100 kindergarten students and an average class size of 25 requires four classes. Reducing the average class size to 20 requires creating one additional class.)

In 1998, the federal government created a program to fund the hiring of 100,000 new teachers, with the goal of bringing the nationwide average class size to 18 in the first, second, and third grades, with a planned expenditure of \$12 billion over seven years.

Last school year, New York City received an estimated \$87 million under the federal program. This Clinton-era initiative has since been scaled back with the funding folded into the federal Title II program for teacher and principal training and recruitment. For the current year, although there is no longer federal funding specifically targeted at class size reduction, sufficient funds will be available through Title II to maintain the reductions already achieved. The city's education department anticipates increasing the amount of federal funds used for class size to cover higher salaries under the new teachers' contract.

In New York State, new funding was provided as part of a 1998 school-aid legislative agreement that also established the universal pre-kindergarten program and the STaR tax cut. Under the state program money was available beginning in school year 1999-2000, with the funding growing in 2000-2001. The state's goal was to reduce average class sizes in kindergarten through the third grade to 20 students. New

York City had some of the largest early grade class sizes in the state—key evidence for Judge Leland DeGrasse in his trial court decision in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity case that city students were not receiving a sound basic education—and therefore city schools were expected to be a major beneficiary of the new program. Since 2000-2001 the state's class size grant to the city has been \$88.8 million.

Budget Allocations for Early Grade Class-Size Initiative				
<i>\$ in millions</i>				
Budget Allocations	1999-2000	2000-2001	Estimated 2001-2002	Plan 2002-2003
Class Formation (teaching positions)	\$95.4	\$124.8	\$127.4	\$143.6
Supplemental instruction (teaching positions)	-	55.5	70.4	77.2
Prof. Development, Recruiting, Admin., etc	13.6	15.6	14.8	-
Total Allocation	\$109.0	\$195.9	\$212.5	\$220.8
Funding			Estimated	Estimated
Federal grant	\$47.4	\$70.9	\$86.9	\$98.9
State grant	47.9	88.8	88.8	88.8
City and unrestricted state aid	13.7	36.2	36.8	33.1
Total Funding	\$109.0	\$195.9	\$212.5	\$220.8
Number of Classes Formed	unknown	1,563	1,607	1,586
Teachers for Classes (1.2 per class)	unknown	1,876	1,928	1,903
Teachers for Supplemental Instruction	-	848	1,006	1,006
Total Funded Teaching Positions	unknown	2,724	2,934	2,909

SOURCES: IBO based on analysis of education department DBOR Allocation Memoranda and Financial Status Reports, Fiscal Years 2000-2003.
 NOTE: Federal grant for class-size reduction replaced with Title II Part A funding in 2002-2003.

The city's initiative. The city's Department of Education combined the state and federal grants, as well as some city money, to fund its own early grade class-size initiative. The budget for the initiative has grown from \$109 million in 1999-2000 to an estimated \$213 million in 2001-2002, and \$221 million for this school year. Most of the money has gone to hire new teachers; approximately 2,900 positions are funded through the initiative for this year. With a limited number of classrooms available, only a portion of these teachers have been used to create whole new classes that contribute to reducing the class-size average. Many of the other teachers provide supplemental instruction, allowing pupils in large classes to spend part of the day learning in small groups. Some funds also have been allocated to teacher recruitment and training.¹

In allocating the class-size initiative's funds, the Department of Education has presented a much higher number of newly

created classes than IBO found in its analysis of the data. The discrepancy is largely due to the effect of the enrollment decline. The department is counting as new classes created under its initiative classrooms and teachers that were freed up because of lower enrollments. IBO measured the number of new classes simply by comparing the number of classes in 1998-1999 with those in 2001-2002.

Citywide, the number of early grade classes grew by 729 over three years while enrollment declined by nearly 20,000 students. If enrollment had stayed constant, the new classes alone would have yielded a reduction in the citywide average class size of only 1.3 students, less than half of the overall reduction that has occurred. The accompanying decline in K-3 enrollment over the same period accounts for the other 1.5 student decline in the citywide average.

Results vary by school district. The results of the early grade class-size initiative vary across the city. Because neither the state nor federal class-size reduction grants provide funds to increase capacity, overcrowded schools in many parts of the city have limited the opportunities to reduce class sizes. Overcrowded schools by definition seldom have space available for creating the new classes needed to reduce average class sizes. Three of the four community school districts with the highest average class sizes—all had averages above 24 students in 2001-2002—were also among the most overcrowded in the city.² The enrollment in these districts' elementary schools (District 24 in Corona/Middle Village; 6 in Northern Manhattan; and 27 in Southern Queens/Rockaway) exceeded their capacity by 13 percent, 7 percent, and 7 percent, respectively. Although class sizes in these districts remained well above the city average, they were reduced in each case.

In District 24, the opening of new schools and more efficient use of existing space added over 2,200 elementary school seats that made it possible to increase the number of early grade classes by 58 and thus reduce the average class size by 2.2 students even while total enrollment held constant. Such large increases in capacity were uncommon, however; only District 25 (Flushing) with 2,400 new seats and District 31 (Staten Island) with 3,100 new seats had larger increases. Over the three-year period, the total number of elementary school seats in the city grew by 24,200.

In Districts 6 and 27, there were more modest increases in capacity that contributed to the reduction in class sizes, but more importantly, these districts experienced substantial reductions in the number of students in the early grades as

well, although they still remained overcrowded.

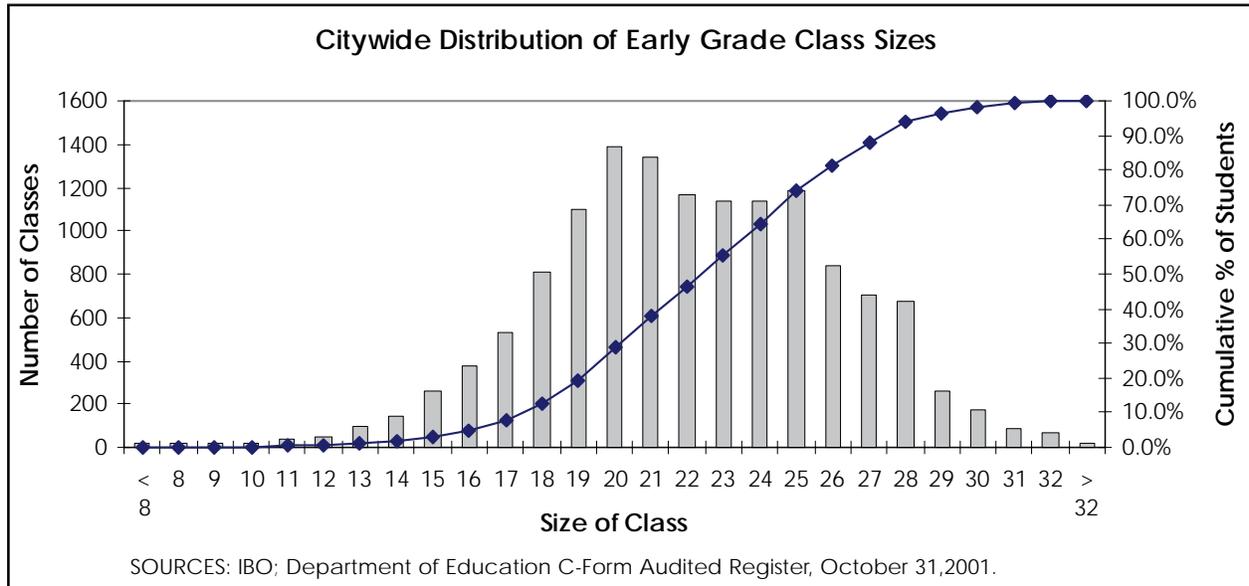
In District 6, early grade class sizes averaged 25.8 students in school year 1998-1999. By 2001-2002, the average had declined by 1.6 students even though there had been only a modest increase in the number of classes (seven) and the district was one of only two that received no funding to form new classes from the state grant because there were no unused classrooms available. (The district did receive \$5.0 million for supplemental instruction.) A decline of 607 students enrolled in the early grades in the district meant that simply by maintaining the same number of classes the average class size would have fallen by 1.2 children—more than half of the 1.6 student reduction that actually occurred.

In District 27, the average fell from 26.5 to 24.0 students. By spending \$3.6 million of the state and federal grants for new classes, the district provided 28 additional early grade classes by 2001-2002. However, the new classes account for half of the reduction in the district's average class size. Roughly half of the 2.5 student decline in the average class size occurred because the number of students fell by 726 between 1998-1999 and 2001-2002.

In other districts the early grade initiative provided the resources to come close to the target of averaging 20 students in a class. Some districts, particularly those with more seats than students, experienced large reductions in the average class size. Of the five districts that lowered their average class size by at least four students, all had excess capacity, which made it easier to bring the averages close to 20 students. In a handful of districts, such as District 1 on the Lower East Side, which has the most unused capacity of any district in the city, class sizes were already small by New York City standards so that only a relatively small increase in the number of classes was needed to bring the average early grade class to below 20 students.

Class size distribution. Even with the reduction in average class sizes, many students are still in classrooms with large numbers of children. More than half of the youngsters included in this analysis still attend classes with 23 or more students, although three years earlier, over half of the students were in classes of 26 or more. Last school year there were also 2,825 classes, accounting for over 25 percent of the early grade students, with more than 25 children.

Again, there is considerable variation among the districts when we compare the size distribution of early grade classes. In eight districts, half of the students are in classes with 20 or



fewer children (Districts 1, 4, 5, 7, 13, 16, 19, and 85, which is the Chancellor’s District for troubled schools). At the other extreme, four districts (6, 10, 27, and 29) have 50 percent of their students in classes with 25 or more children, and in two other districts (17 and 24) 50 percent of students are in classes of 26 or more. In District 24, which is the most overcrowded in the city, over 18 percent of the students in the early grades attend classes with 30 or more children, while District 17 has over 12 percent in such big classes. These two districts alone account for 41 percent of all classes with 30 or more students in the city.

Conclusion. This analysis indicates that although the class-size reduction initiative has made progress in shrinking the average number of students in K-3 classes, it has fallen short of the state goal of reducing the citywide average to 20 children. In addition, many students are still attending very large classes. A combination of insufficient funding given the number of classes needed and stubborn space shortages in many districts has left the citywide average at 22.1 even with the decline in enrollments. At current enrollment levels, a

further decline in the citywide average of 2.1 students would require creating over 1,400 new classes, nearly double the number added in the last three years. The Department of Education, however, anticipates a further decline of 6.6 percent in early grade enrollments over the next three years. If this projection holds up and the number of classes remains at its current level, the average class size would fall to 20.7 by school year 2004-2005.

Written by George Sweeting

END NOTES

¹ The federal program provides school districts with the flexibility to use the grant money in ways that do not directly affect class sizes, such as deploying roaming teachers that visit large classes and work with youngsters in small groups. The state grant may only be used to create new classes.

² District 17 in Crown Heights/East Flatbush is an anomaly in that it has high average class sizes (24.3 students) but is not an overcrowded district. This is a result of some schools in the district being very crowded, and other schools being under capacity.

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