English

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Class Size and English—
Looking for Hard Data

The National Council of Teachers of
English has recommended a maximum
workload of 100 students per day in
secondary-level English programs
The recommendation is based mainly
on common-sense ideas about produc-
tive class discussion and adequate
feedback in composition instruction.

Such arguments are powerful, and
indeed Florida and Vermont already
place limits on class size or workload
for English teachers, hoping to im-
prove student writing performance.
Ernest Boyer states the face-value case
for such action in High School: A Re-
port on Secondary Education in
America.

Today most teachers meet five classes
daily, with 25 to 30 students each. If the
teacher gives one writing assignment every
week to each student, he or she spends, at
a minimum, more than 20 hours correct-
ing papers.

However, the research basis for the
plea for smaller classes is soft. Several
recent developments at NCTE deal
with the problem of inadequate re-
search bases on the question of class
size in English. This report will briefly
describe the initial work of the NCTE
Task Force on Class Size, with particu-
lar reference to a research summary
prepared for that group and to a new
ERIC/RCS Digest (Meir, 1984) pre-
pared especially for administrators
and policymakers.

The Task Force, chaired by William
L. Smith, University of Pittsburgh, met
in Urbana in August to consider: a
review of research prepared for the
group by Thomas Albritton of Florida
State University; to identify kinds of
research that might clarify the rela-
tions between class size and English
instruction; to suggest means of fund-
ing and otherwise encouraging such
research; and to recommend appro-
priate immediate actions that might be
taken by NCTE. The Task Force will
make a preliminary report to the
NCTE Executive Committee later this
year.

Members of the Task Force agreed
initially that the research agenda
should not aim to prove that smaller
English classes are more effective.
Rather, future research should pose
the right questions and let the results
speak for themselves. At the same
time, Task Force members acknowledged
that common sense arguments
like Boyer's, as well as some existing
research (Applebee, 1978), point to
reduction of class size as an eminently
sensible action. They discussed a vari-
ety of other ways to deal with large
English classes—including, for exam-
ple, training teachers in small-group
instruction as a way to cope with prob-
lems of feedback on student writing.

Existing research states clearly that
reducing the teacher-student ratio
does not usually improve student per-
formance, unless the number of stu-
dents can be reduced to 15 or fewer.
The Task Force emphasized the idea
that class size interacts with instruc-
tional content and method to affect
learning—and future research should,
among other things, deal with instruc-
tional variables. One Task Force mem-
ber suggested that "data-driven testi-
mony" might provide another kind of
research evidence on effects of class
size.

and Margaret Meir's ERIC Digest
(1984) provide an interesting back-
drop for the work of the Task Force.
Albritton discusses recent meta-
analyses and explores the implications
of individual studies like those of Bam-
berg (1977) and Shapson (1978). Bam-
berg conducted a survey of the work-
load of California English teachers,
while Shapson's research revealed
gaps between teachers' perceptions of
the effects of reduced class size and
direct observations of their teaching
behavior. The ERIC Digest traces con-
clusions-in-common about class size
found in meta-analyses, explores im-
plications of those conclusions for En-
GLISH instruction, and suggests appro-
priate actions for administrators and
policymakers.

The Albritton report is available in
the ERIC database. The ERIC Digest
is available in single copies at no cost.
Send a request and a self-addressed
stamped business envelope to ERIC/
RCS, 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL
61801.

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