

MSU research: Small classes have long-term benefit for all students

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Spyros Konstantopoulos, associate professor of education, says several consecutive years of small classes in early elementary school benefit students of all achievement levels. Photo by Andy Henion

EAST LANSING, Mich. — Providing small classes for at least several consecutive grades starting in early elementary school gives students the best chance to succeed in later grades, according to groundbreaking new research from a Michigan State University scholar.

The research by Spyros Konstantopoulos, associate professor of education, is the first to examine the effects of class size over a sustained period and for all levels of students – from low- to high-achievers. The study appears in the American Journal of Education.

Konstantopoulos also is a member of a committee for the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences that will make official recommendations on class size to the states. He said the recommendations will mirror his research: that the best plan of attack is to provide small classes (13 to 17 students) for at least several years starting in kindergarten or first grade.

"For a long time states thought they could just do it in kindergarten or first grade for one year and get the benefits," Konstantopoulos said. "I don't believe that. I think you need at least a few years consecutively where all students, and especially low-achievers, receive the treatment, and then you see the benefits later."

His research used data from the massive Project Star study in Tennessee that analyzed the effects of class size on more than 11,000 students in elementary and middle school. Konstantopoulos found that students who had been in small classes from kindergarten through third grade had substantially higher test scores in grades four through eight than students who had been in larger classes early on.

Students from all achievement levels benefited from small classes, the research found. But low-achievers benefited the most, which narrowed the achievement gap with high-achievers in science, reading and math, Konstantopoulos said.

Although the study didn't evaluate classroom practices, Konstantopoulos said the reason for the narrowing gap likely is due to low-achieving students receiving more attention from teachers.

"This is especially important in poorer schools because teacher effectiveness matters more in schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged and low-performing students," he said.