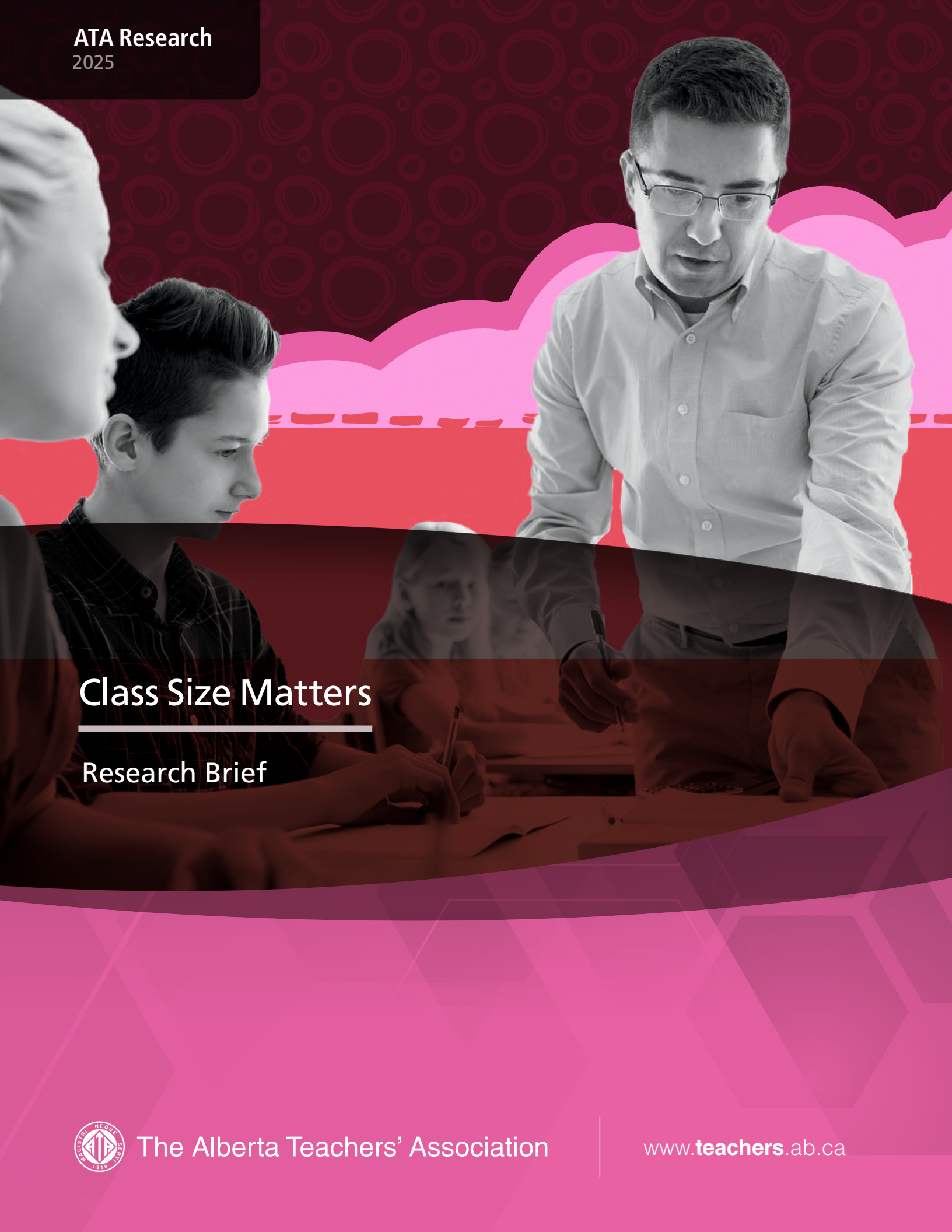




Class Size Matters

Research Brief





The Alberta Teachers' Association

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Alberta Teachers' Association

11010 142 Street NW, Edmonton AB T5N 2R1

Telephone 780-447-9400 or 1-800-232-7208

www.teachers.ab.ca

*Further information about the Association's research is available from Dr Philip McRae
at the Alberta Teachers' Association; e-mail research@ata.ab.ca.*

Why Class Size Matters

Smaller Classes Help Students and Teachers Succeed Together

Reducing class size creates conditions for effective teaching and meaningful learning. Canadian researchers provide evidence that smaller classes improve teacher–student relationships, support teachers’ attention to diverse and complex student needs, make classroom management easier and help teachers adapt lessons to more personalized learning needs (Bascia and Faubert 2012; Finn, Pannozzo and Achilles 2003).

Research from around the world supports this (Education Endowment Foundation 2023; Krueger and Whitmore 2001), showing that classes of around 20 students or fewer (particularly in the early grades) lead to improved academic outcomes and stronger student engagement. The Tennessee Project STAR experiment demonstrated that students who attended small classes in the early years not only achieved higher test scores but were also more likely to take college entrance exams later (Krueger and Whitmore 2001).

“Class size doesn’t matter unless you are one of too many kids or the only teacher. When people say class size doesn’t matter, they are talking about other people’s children.”

– Joe Bower, Red Deer teacher (1978–2016)

Benefits are Greatest for Disadvantaged Learners

Evidence from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the UK, since 2020, shows that class size reductions yield the largest gains for students from low-income, multilingual or special-needs backgrounds. Smaller classes provide more equitable access to learning through individualized feedback, relational connection and inclusion. This aligns with Canadian research (Bascia and Faubert 2012), emphasizing that teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions.

Long-term Returns Outweigh Short-term Cost Savings

When cost cutting leads to larger class sizes, economic models show that the short-term fiscal savings often produce greater systemic long-term costs, including lower graduation rates and decreased lifetime earnings (Schanzenbach 2014). Moreover, the philosophical critiques of cost-benefit models highlight that such an analysis undervalues social and developmental outcomes, failing to capture the full educational and societal return on investment.

Combine Class Size Reduction with Certificated Teachers and Inclusion Supports

Reducing class sizes works best when paired with teacher supports for differentiated instruction, inclusive education that is fully resourced and funded, and comprehensive school and mental health resources. Smaller classes allow teachers to more effectively implement evidence-based pedagogies (eg, formative assessments, cooperative learning, localized engagement with curriculum), especially when supported by ongoing professional development and adequate resources (Blatchford 2012; Finn 2019).

Strategic Considerations

SMALLER CLASSES, SMARTER POLICY

Prioritize Early Grades

A robust body of international and national research confirms that class size reductions have their strongest and most sustained effects in the early grades (kindergarten to Grade 3), enhancing children's academic performance and behavioural outcomes.

Address Class Size and Complexity Together

Alberta classrooms are indicating increasing complexity and diversity in student needs, with a growing number of learners requiring social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive supports, English language learning assistance and interventions for behavioural challenges (ATA 2023). Policymaking should therefore consider supports for class complexity as essential as considerations of class size.

Working Conditions are Learning Conditions

Class sizes contribute to both working and learning conditions. Policy should align with this understanding to ensure that recruitment, retention and wellness strategies sustain teacher and school leader efficacy and reduce Alberta's growing moral distress and teacher burnout.

Bring Alberta into Alignment with Best Practices

OECD and UNESCO global averages from 2025 indicate that the Government of Alberta's Commission on Learning (ACOL) class size targets from 2003 remain achievable and are evidence-based. Implementing them would be an investment in the future, bringing Alberta into alignment with international best practices.

Restore Public Transparency and Accountability

The Government of Alberta ended its Class Size Initiative in 2019 and has not released class size data since 2018–19, leaving the public with no clear picture of current trends. To fill this gap, the ATA conducted its own provincial research, which shows that Alberta's classrooms are now the most crowded in Canada—well above OECD averages—with many exceeding 30 students, and urban classes often reaching 35 to 40 (ATA 2025).

To restore transparency and accountability, the province should reinstate public, jurisdiction-level class size reporting and introduce a Classroom Complexity Index, as used in other education systems. This index would combine factors such as English language learning prevalence, special education needs and Individualized Support Plans, ensuring that funding and staffing reflect the number of students in each class and the complexity of their learning needs. Without transparent, system-wide monitoring, the true extent of overcrowding remains hidden. Increasing class sizes and classroom complexity are eroding teachers' capacity to provide individualized support and are contributing to growing moral distress across the profession.

What Decades of Research Reveals About Class Size

Class size has long been a topic of debate both internationally and across Canada, yet the research remains remarkably consistent: smaller class sizes allow for better outcomes, increased time with the curriculum, and more opportunities for teachers to focus on students' individual needs and interests, especially in the early grades (Laitsch, Nguyen and Younghusband 2021; Baker, Farrie and Sciarra 2016; Harfitt and Tsui 2015).

Smaller classes have particularly pronounced positive effects on students experiencing social, linguistic or academic disadvantages (Filges, Sonne-Schmidt and Nielsen 2021; Schanzenbach 2014). International research from the OECD (2025) supports these findings, further stating that smaller classes contribute to increased student engagement and help build stronger learning relationships while also playing a role in shaping students' broader life achievements.

Post-pandemic research adds further weight to the case for smaller classes. Studies have shown that individualized attention from certificated teachers, whether achieved through class-size reduction or small-group instruction, can effectively accelerate learning recovery (Carbonari et al 2024).

In addition to benefiting students, smaller class sizes also improve teacher outcomes (Baker, Farrie and Sciarra 2016, 5). They

enhance teacher efficacy, morale and job satisfaction, which are crucial for recruitment and retention, especially in the context of a global teacher shortage (eg, Bascia and Faubert 2012; Hirsch et al 2007). This is particularly urgent given that, in many systems, as many as one in five teachers under 30 plan to leave the profession within five years, and in some jurisdictions that figure rises to nearly half (OECD 2025).

In 2003, the Government of Alberta created ACOL to review key aspects of the education system, including class size. ACOL's report recommended average class size targets as follows:

- **17 students for kindergarten to Grade 3;**
- **23 students for Grades 4 to 6;**
- **25 students for Grades 7 to 9; and**
- **27 students for high school.**

Smaller class sizes allow for better outcomes, increased time with the curriculum, and more opportunities for teachers to focus on students' individual needs and interests

The ACOL went on to recommend that “class composition should be considered by schools in setting class size. Generally, classes with special needs students, students whose first language is not English, and vulnerable and at-risk students should be smaller than the suggested guideline. ... School jurisdictions and the province should be required to report annually on average class sizes and should be accountable for explaining whether or not the guidelines have been met. The province should provide adequate funding to enable school jurisdictions to meet the class size guidelines” (p. 8).

OECD (2025) has published data showing that class sizes average around 21 students in primary school (Grades 4 to 6) and 23 in lower secondary (Grades 6 to 9), with an average student–teacher ratio being 14 students to 1 teacher across OECD countries.

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