CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Class size reduction is a popular, if expensive, reform. It has great intuitive appeal to parents, who can easily verify that efforts are being made to improve their children’s education. Teachers’ unions also support CSR, in part because it results in smaller teacher workloads. Recent research findings can be expected to bolster support for CSR. The support is not as strong among researchers. Hanushek’s review of research findings show’s no consistent support for smaller class sizes (Hanushek, 1998). Some more recent research has been more supportive of CSR. The evaluation of the third year of CSR in California has again found small, but consistent, improvements in students’ performance from CSR (Stecher & Bohrnstedt, 2000). A separate report using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed improved student performance was associated with lower pupil-teacher ratios in lower grades (Grissmer et al., 2000). These more positive research results may overshadow previous research findings that often had much more mixed findings of effectiveness.

Part of the reason CSR is appealing to state-level policymakers is its simplicity. State, and federal, policymakers are several layers removed from the classroom. Not only are they organizationally distanced from where education happens, the links between these organizations are loose. These two factors make it difficult for state-level policymakers to rapidly affect change in the classroom in ways that have fidelity to state-level intentions. The results in California show CSR to be one of the few reforms that can be quickly implemented and show positive outcomes, despite many of the difficulties described in this report.

Recent changes and reforms in education finance are placing state policymakers in an increasingly precarious position. The combination of school equity litigation and tax revolts has resulted in increased centralization of education funding at the state level. This increased centralization has increased the state’s role and responsibility in providing for students’ education. At the same time, many popular reforms, from school-based management to vouchers, seek to decentralize power over policy and resource allocation decisions to the school level. So while state policymakers’ responsibility in the education system has grown, more recent reform efforts work to reduce the influence they have over schools. They are left with little ability to affect the things they are responsible for providing. This may be the appropriate division of power and responsibility. But, this division clearly increases the attractiveness of CSR to state-level policymakers as a policy they can enact which has support among both parents and teacher, that can be implemented relatively quickly, that is easily verifiable in schools, and has research showing its positive effect.

In other words, where one stands on CSR may depend on where one sits. To a state-level policy maker CSR is an effective reform, supported by many parents and teachers, that shows some evidence of positive outcomes. This can be compared to other reforms such
as school-based reform or increasing teacher training, that may be less expensive but are more difficult to quickly implement across a state (Darling-Hammond, 1998, Herman et al., 1999, Bodilly, 1998).

This increased responsibility also creates the need for increased research to support state-level policymaking. This research should focus on improved implementation given the emerging organizational and institutional relationships. A possible route for these relationships was termed “loose-tight coupling” by Boyd and Hartman (1998). In this type of system, states set expectations for performance and play a role in funding. Grissmer highlights one model for this relationship; the state sets standards and uses assessments for accountability. He argues this model was the “most plausible explanation” for improvements in student performance seen in Texas and North Carolina. But Grissmer’s findings have been called into question. Darling-Hammond has argued that improvements in North Carolina are due to teacher policies (1999). This disagreement highlights the need for further research into state education policy implementation.

This report aims to support to state-level policymakers by providing clear guidance on implementing CSR in an efficient and equitable manner. In many ways this report builds upon the experiences in California’s CSR implementation. It was California’s inequities that motivated the research into the cost of CSR. The California CSR evaluation uncovered growing inequities in the distribution of teachers that motivated the additional research in teacher movements.

The findings can help states avoid some of the pitfalls experienced in California and provide new information on alternative funding strategies and teacher movements. While the findings are extensive, there are a few simple policy recommendations that can significantly improve the efficiency and equity of CSR implementation as seen in California:

1. The target method is a much less expensive class size measurement mechanism that results in average class sizes that are closer to the policy goal.

2. CSR in smaller schools (those with under 50 students) is about 10% more expensive than in larger schools.

3. Reallocation of resources from aides to new classrooms can pay for a portion of CSR’s costs, and in some instances cover the entire cost.

4. If states choose to reimburse districts for the cost of CSR, then
   - The “Rules of Thumb” provide a good method to estimate costs, and
   - Reimbursement strategies should account for differences in teacher salaries and class sizes in reimbursement amounts.
5. To counter the potential for growth in inequalities in the distribution of qualified teachers, new classrooms should be filled with new teachers first.

6. Teacher training dollars should follow unqualified teachers.