

Summary and Conclusion

Research examining the impact of class size on achievement indicates that class size reduction is most effective in the first four years of schooling, that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most, and that beneficial effects decrease as grade level increases (e.g., Shin & Chung, 2009). In Ireland, there is a history of positive discrimination towards schools serving disadvantaged communities through policies that have provided for the reduction of primary class size, with the targeting of junior grades for smaller classes prioritised. Previous analyses have shown that maximum class size policies under schemes addressing disadvantage have been successful in achieving reductions in class sizes in participating urban schools. The current study sought to assess the extent to which the recommended junior class sizes under DEIS were achieved in Band 1 schools in 2014/15. It also sought to determine if there is any evidence of a change in the level of positive discrimination towards junior classes in Band 1 DEIS schools noted in Weir and McAvinue's study in 2012, in which comparable data for 2009/10 were described.

In summary, the analyses of junior class sizes revealed a high level of implementation of the maximum class size policy under DEIS in 2014/15. The analyses also indicated a class size advantage for junior classes in Band 1 schools over junior classes in urban non-DEIS schools, and this was most evident for classes in junior schools (i.e., schools enrolling from junior infants through first or second class only). The study further revealed that the very junior grades were prioritised to some extent for smaller classes in Band 1 schools in 2014/15. This was evidenced in the higher percentage of small classes (20 or fewer students) at junior infants grade in both junior schools and vertical schools (i.e., schools with both junior and senior classes) in Band 1, and also in the percentage of smaller second classes in some vertical schools (i.e., senior schools enrolling second class through sixth class) in Band 1. Second class is *the most junior grade* in senior schools that enrol second classes, which in 2014/15 represented 13.4% (25) of schools in DEIS Band 1 (Table 1). In vertical 'all-through' schools (i.e., schools enrolling junior infants through sixth class), which represented 60.5% (113) of all urban Band 1 schools in 2014/15, although the greatest percentage of smaller classes were found at junior infant level, analyses revealed that third classes were targeted over second classes (and first classes) for reduced class sizes.

While there was clear evidence of positive discrimination towards Band 1 schools in terms of junior class size in 2014/15, a comparison of the data between 2009/10 and 2014/15 revealed some erosion of positive discrimination over time. Specifically, average junior class sizes in Band 1 schools increased between 2009/10 and 2014/15, particularly in vertical schools compared to vertical urban non-DEIS schools. Also, the percentage of smaller junior classes (20 or fewer students and 22 or fewer students) decreased in all Band 1 schools over time, with the very junior classes, particularly first class, most affected. Again, vertical schools in Band 1 were more adversely impacted than junior schools in Band 1. It is important to note that the decrease in the percentage of smaller junior classes over that period in vertical schools in Band 1 was accompanied by an increase in the percentage of smaller senior classes at all grade levels in these schools. This reflects schools' allocation of teachers across junior and senior classes in light of the maximum class sizes possible under DEIS (20 students in junior classes and 24 students in senior classes). It should also be noted that it is relatively easy to reduce average class size in the context of falling enrolments, but more difficult to do so when enrolments are rising as has been the case since 2009/10 (DES, 2010-2015).

In conclusion, junior classes in Band 1 schools were substantially smaller than junior classes in non-DEIS schools in 2014/15, confirming the positive impact of class size policy under DEIS. However, there is evidence of some erosion of positive discrimination since comparable analyses were undertaken on the size of classes in Band 1 schools in 2009/10. Ongoing monitoring of schools' implementation of various aspects of DEIS, including class size, is recommended.