

TOP STORY ■■■

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Movement to shrink class size falters amid budget austerity

By David Harrison, Stateline Staff Writer

A proposal in Texas to loosen elementary school class-size requirements has touched off a skirmish that could consume the state's legislative session this year.

State Comptroller Susan Combs said last month that relaxing the state's 27-year-old class-size cap could save \$558 million at a time when lawmakers are grappling with a \$27 billion two-year deficit.

The proposal has found some support in the Legislature, where Republicans last year cemented their hold on government. Teachers' groups,

parents and some local school officials are pushing back, setting the stage for a prolonged

battle over a rule that, in the words of one superintendent, has become "sacrosanct."



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"It's going to be very contentious," says state Senator Florence Shapiro, who chairs the Senate education committee. "It may go down to the wire."

Similar debates are playing out in state capitals across the country as states and school districts prepare for what could be the most gruesome budget year of the current fiscal crisis. With billions of dollars in federal stimulus money expiring at the end of the fiscal year, policymakers will be confronted with anemic revenues at a time of rising health care and social service costs. In several states, small classes are becoming a casualty of the recession, ending roughly two decades of shrinking classroom size.

Last year, 11 states relaxed class-size requirements either through legislative action or administratively, says Sterling Lloyd, a senior research associate at the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. Other states, such as Texas, are seeking to fit more students in classrooms this year. Idaho's state superintendent last week proposed boosting average class sizes, which would eliminate 770 teaching jobs and save \$514 million over five years.

"I would anticipate that states would at least consider it because the fiscal problems are not going away," Lloyd says. "States are going to continue to encounter a range of challenges and budget cuts."

The issue has been coming up since the recession began. In 2009, in California, school officials deferred funding for a program that sent state money to school districts to shrink classes in kindergarten through third grade. The state relaxed penalties to districts that did not comply with the reductions. Last year, then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger cut another \$550 million from the class-size reduction program. It remains to be seen how the budget proposals of newly inaugurated Governor Jerry Brown will affect the program.

Last year in Florida, a ballot question asked voters if they wanted to repeal a 2002 constitutional amendment setting class-size caps. The measure won 55 percent of the statewide

vote, but that was short of the 60 percent required to overturn a constitutional amendment. The law fines school districts up to \$3,000 for each additional student in classes that exceed the mandated maximum. Palm Beach County already owes the state \$16.6 million in fines. State school officials are considering reducing or eliminating the fines, and lawmakers are looking for a legislative solution. Some districts have threatened to sue over the fines.

Georgia's board of education lifted class-size requirements on school districts last year, and already 123 of the state's 181 districts have told the state they might raise their limits. In the past, class-size requirements were so rigid that schools gaining a handful of new students after the start of the school year would sometimes have to split up classrooms and hire new teachers midway through a semester. "We realized that that's not always the best solution for students," state board chairman Wanda Barrs says. "Where's your pool of exceptional teachers when you have to hire them at various points during the year?"

Do smaller classes help?

State officials say that loosening statewide restrictions gives local districts more leeway to manage difficult budget situations. "You're untying the hands of local districts," says Clara Keith, Georgia's associate superintendent for school improvement. Some local administrators, however, see that as a way to move difficult decisions out of state jurisdiction and onto the individual school districts.

Backers of larger class sizes are finding some support from Washington. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, in a speech in November, noted that many high-performing school systems in Asia have larger classes than the United States and urged school districts to consider raising class sizes, at least in the higher grades.

"In secondary schools," he said, "districts may be able to save money without hurting students, while allowing modest but smartly targeted increases in class size."

Last year's federal Race to the Top grant program did not include a requirement that states use the money to maintain small class sizes, even though some states said in their applications that they would use the money for that purpose. Some researchers, however, fear that putting more students in elementary school classrooms could roll back recent improvements in student performance, particularly among at-risk students.

"We will be doing a lot of harm to a lot of kids from lower-income homes if we start putting them back in bigger and bigger classes," says Jeremy Finn, a professor of education at SUNY-Buffalo.

The push to shrink classes dates to the early 1980's, when Tennessee launched a statewide experiment known as Project STAR. The project randomly assigned some students to regular classes and others to smaller ones in schools throughout the state. Researchers then tracked students as they progressed through school.

"I analyzed the data and I reanalyzed the data and people from all over the world have reanalyzed those same data and the findings are solid," says Finn, who worked on the Tennessee study. "The more years you spend in a small class in K through 3, the more likely you are to have long-term carryover effects." Students in the study scored higher on tests and were more likely to graduate from high school and take college entrance exams.

The Tennessee experiment touched off a rush to reduce class sizes across the country. Today, about 40 states have some form of class-size reduction program. American elementary schools had an average size of 20 students in 2008, down from 24.1 a decade earlier, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

“Class-size reduction policies came into effect because of an economic boom,” says Beth Graue, a professor of early childhood education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “It was in the ’90s and we had money to spend and it was invested in reducing pupil-teacher ratios.”

But researchers have yet to conclude what the ideal number of students in a classroom is. And most of the research centers on the early grades, which means that the effect of small classes on middle school or high school students is less well understood.

Despite these questions, small class sizes remain a cause for many parents and teachers’ groups. The 2002 Florida constitutional amendment was spearheaded by parents, and a recent poll in Texas found that 61 percent of respondents opposed lifting the state’s class-size restrictions to balance the budget.

“You’re running up against this very emotional topic,” says Richard Middleton, superintendent of the North East Independent School District in San Antonio. Middleton says he would rather see a proposal to keep classes small in schools that serve low-income populations while letting them increase slightly elsewhere, rather than the current mandate that no class in kindergarten through third grade in any district have more than 22 pupils.

The Texas comptroller’s proposal would amend the law to say that elementary classes must average 22 students across a district, rather than using 22 students as a hard cap for every classroom. Shapiro, the Senate education chair, says the change would give local school officials more flexibility.

“They can make decisions locally, which is where it belongs,” she says. This is happening even in the absence of state legislation. Fast-growing school districts can apply for a waiver from the class size requirement. Waiver applications are rarely turned down.

“The number 22-to-one was an arbitrary number,” Shapiro says. “It was really put in place at a time when we thought smaller class sizes were the most important element in the classroom. Today, I believe the most important element in the classroom is the teacher.”

— Contact David Harrison at dharrison@pewtrusts.org

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