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HARD TIMES: Falling state budgets, rising class sizes at crowded schools when students return

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Like a seesaw on the school playground, falling state budgets are pushing class sizes higher.

The recession is forcing districts to lay off teachers even as the economic stimulus pumps billions of dollars into schools. As a result, classrooms across the country will be more crowded when school starts in the fall.

Patti Hathorn, a fifth-grade teacher in rural Pinson, Ala., is expecting 29 or 30 students, making it the biggest class she's taught. Many of her students at Kermit Johnson Elementary are learning English or are in special education.

"You may have a child that needs you, that needs that adult figure, to spend the extra five minutes with them. If you have five or six extra kids, that five minutes is gone," Hathorn said.

It's the same story in small communities such as Pinson and Wapakoneta, Ohio, and urban areas including Los Angeles and Broward County, Fla. In many places, classes will have well over 30 kids.

There is no official data on class sizes for the upcoming year; many states and districts have not finalized their budgets. A survey this year by the American Association of School Administrators found that 44 percent of school districts expected to increase class size.

Educators and parents worry the larger classes will keep kids from learning.

"The issue is how this affects kids and what price this generation is going to have to pay," said John White, principal of Mulholland Middle School in Los Angeles, where the district has laid off more than 2,000 teachers.

Classes in Los Angeles are expected to grow by two kids in fourth through 12th grades. Middle school classes will have 35 kids on average; juniors and seniors will have about 43 kids in each class. Kindergarten through third-grade classes will rise by four kids to 24.

Very large classes can keep teachers from teaching because their time is spent keeping order. Crowded classrooms also increase the chance that struggling students may fall through the cracks.

"I certainly won't say there's a magic number because it depends on the nature of the student group," said Jeremy Finn, education professor at University at Buffalo-SUNY. "But in the elementary grades especially, there's a certain point at which teachers can't do what they were trained to do."

Just as there's a downside to bigger classes, there's an upside to smaller ones, he said.

Research has shown that younger children, those in kindergarten through third grade, perform and behave better in smaller classes. Benefits are strongest for minority and poor children, Finn said.

There is evidence that being in small classes early on improves a student's chance of graduating from high school or taking the SAT or ACT college entrance exams.

Most often cited is a large-scale, four-year study of smaller class sizes in Tennessee in the 1980s. The study found that by eighth grade, children who had had smaller classes

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in kindergarten through third grade had substantial advantages in all subjects over their peers who had been in larger classes.

Others dispute the importance of smaller classes; the debate is far from settled.

Researcher Eric Hanushek called it "kind of silly" that advocates still rely on 20-year-old data from Tennessee. He pointed to other studies that showed small to negligible benefits for kids in small classes.

"All the research suggests the number of kids is much less important than who is teaching the class," said Hanushek, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. "In the face of budget problems, allowing class size to move a little bit makes all the sense in the world."

"In fact, to the extent you put ineffective teachers into classrooms, you're much better off by keeping larger classes with effective teachers," he said.

The trouble with this recession is that kids may wind up with larger classes and ineffective teachers.

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