The Washington Post

HARD TIMES: School budgets dip, class sizes grow

By LIBBY QUAID
The Associated Press
Monday, July 27, 2009 12:00 AM

WASHINGTON -- 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 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.

Mass layoffs are reshuffling teachers into grades or subjects they may never have taught, or taught long ago. Administrators are being pushed back into the classroom after years away from teaching.

At Coweeman Middle School in rural Kelso, Wash., one teacher who has taught math for 30 years has been reassigned to special education, principal Randy Heath said. In fact, every teacher who is endorsed to teach special education is being switched to those classes, regardless of whether he or she actually has it, he said.

"We're being forced to make decisions that we know are not good for kids," Heath said.

Money from the economic stimulus has reduced the number of teacher layoffs, but job losses are still widespread. Although the stimulus provided an unprecedented $100 billion for education, that's not enough to cover state and local budget shortfalls.

The stimulus boosted federal spending and helped restore cuts in state budgets, sources that together provide about 56 percent of school dollars. It did not make up for local tax revenues, which give schools the rest of their money.

Local revenues have been socked by the recession and may dip even lower because property assessments tend to lag behind a recession.

"It's a little hard to tell whether this upcoming school year or the one after is going to be more difficult," said Mike Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the biggest urban public school systems.

This school year, Cheryl James of Sacramento, Calif., plans to volunteer in her 12-year-old son's classroom to help teachers facing bigger class sizes at his middle school.

James expects his classes to get bigger because of teacher layoffs and retirements, but she doesn't yet know by how much.

"If you have more people in the room - trying to get their hand up, trying to get their question answered, trying to get someone to stop kicking the back of their chair - there are going to be more problems," James said.