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Class size effort is a learning process

As Florida implements its constitutional amendment reducing class sizes, research shows it may go too far, at too great a cost.

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California is spending $1-billion a year to reduce class sizes, but only in kindergarten through third grade. Other states are taking a similar approach, limiting class-size cuts to their youngest students.

The reason is simple: Studies show smaller classes can have a significant impact in the primary grades, especially on children from low-income homes. There is little evidence small classes make a difference in higher grades.

So it's hardly surprising that experts are panning Florida's multibillion-dollar effort to reduce class size, calling its mandate for caps in every grade unnecessary and wildly expensive.

"Research shows that if students spend three or four years in a small class, from kindergarten through third grade, the benefits persevere all the way through school," says University at Buffalo education professor Jeremy Finn, who has studied the issue for the U.S. Department of Education. "That would argue that you're wasting your money."

Florida officials are well aware of the research. They say the studies, along with cost, are the major reasons they want to offer voters yet another alternative to the 2002 constitutional amendment that requires smaller classes in kindergarten through 12th grade.

There is little chance, however, their plan will reflect what actually works.

Last year, Gov. Jeb Bush proposed teacher pay raises in lieu of hard caps. That went nowhere. This year, lawmakers are talking about requiring school districts to spend 65 percent of their budgets in the classroom in exchange for more flexible caps.

"Nobody cares about the research," says state Education Commissioner John Winn, when asked why the state doesn't focus on what has worked elsewhere. "Am I going to spend all of my time on the research when it doesn't resonate with the people?"

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U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, the Miami Democrat who spearheaded the 2002 amendment drive, says the argument for smaller classes is clear to anyone with school-age children.

Smaller classes help teachers maintain discipline, he says. That leads to improved attendance, behavior and performance.

"This is about education environment," Meek says, suggesting that without the amendment, lawmakers would jam as many students as possible into classrooms. "Floridians thought it was important to make a very strong statement to the Legislature and the rest of the nation."

But at what cost?

Gov. Bush says class-size reduction will cost Floridians $4-billion this year. And that's with caps figured on a school-by-school average. The price will go up again in 2008-09, when the standard changes to an actual student count for every classroom.

Less clear is what that money will buy.

Despite Meek's insistence on the obvious benefits of class-size reduction, there is no research showing smaller classes in upper grades provide any academic benefit. Florida would, in essence, be spending billions on an education experiment.

"If kids get to grade 9 and they don't know what school is about, a small class isn't going to help," says Charles Achilles, a Seton Hall University professor who has studied class-size issues. He says the decision to include upper grades in Florida's amendment was "badly done."

In contrast, there have been several studies showing class size can make a big difference to younger students, especially when paired with extra teacher training and curriculum improvements.

The best-known findings come from Tennessee, where researchers found that children in classes of 13 to 17 in primary grades had long-term academic gains when compared to students in classes of 22 to 25. Children from low-income families showed the greatest improvement.

Wisconsin chose to focus on schools with high percentages of low-income students. The results have been mixed overall, but African-American and economically disadvantaged students in K-3 have shown pronounced gains compared to their peers.

"There are some schools that have done very well with reduced class sizes, but it doesn't mean that it answers all needs for students," says University of Wisconsin researcher Norman Webb.

And there is the question of how small to go. Florida set its numbers at 18 for K-3, 22 for fourth through eighth grades, and 25 for high school. California caps its participating K-3 classes at 20; Wisconsin at 15.

"There is no single magic number," say Finn, of the University at Buffalo. "Logic would tell you there can't be."

"Class size is just one piece of a really complex puzzle," says Beth Graue, a University of Wisconsin researcher. Just as important, she says, is how teachers take advantage of smaller classes.

But that assumes Florida can find enough qualified teachers. California had to hire about 18,000 teachers when it reduced class sizes in K-3. About 20 percent weren't fully credentialed. Or, as Webb puts it, California "ran out of good teachers."

Gov. Bush has announced a $239-million program to attract 32,000 teachers that will be needed to meet class size rules next year. When Florida school districts hired 22,000 teachers in 2004, nearly 11 percent

were out of field.

About 20 percent of Florida teachers currently have a temporary certificate.

Graue says special training is a must for teachers working in a small class environment. Florida's program does not mandate such training. California's does, and it shows.

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First-grade teacher Sylvia Drennan, a 31-year veteran of the classroom, swears by smaller classes.

In her school in Sacramento, Calif., Drennan moves easily from desk to desk, talking to each child and giving all a chance to participate. She has plenty of time to focus on a boy who moved here from Mexico and speaks little English.

"You have more one-to-one time. It's amazing. And they're reading. There are children in my class reading 120 words per minute," Drennan says. "It makes it easier to teach. You can get in more. You can explain it better, in depth."

Despite such testimonials, California's model is far from perfect.

When it began in 1996, it exacerbated the state's teacher shortages and caused a migration of strong educators from the state's most needy schools. The stringent caps also forced many districts to send children to schools far from home.

As Seton Hall's Achilles puts it, "The California implementation was a textbook case of doing it wrong. But that was before Florida got into it."

California focused on K-3, a nod to both the research and the enormous cost of class size reduction. The state required training for teachers in smaller classes. And because lawmakers rather than voters implemented the program, it left room for legislative changes.

Not that changes have been easy to make. Teachers and parents love smaller classes.

"I'm enough of a politician to tell you that it would be very dumb for me politically to say I'm against class-size reduction," says California state Sen. Jack Scott, chairman of the Senate Education Committee. He called the program one of the most popular initiatives to hit California in the past 15 years.

Such strong sentiment is evident in the 60,000-student Elk Grove Unified School District in Sacramento. People here are so sold on small classes that when facing budget cuts of $10-million a year over four years, they pushed to expand the program. Never mind that class size reduction costs the district about $5-million annually beyond its state funding.

"Everyone had to buy into this and decide it was something important," says School Board member Pollyanna Cooper-LeVangie. "When you walk into a classroom and see it happening, or you teach it . . . you see the benefits."

Many point to Samuel Kennedy Elementary, the district school with the highest percentage of low-income and limited-English students. Once Elk Grove's lowest performing school on state accountability

measures, Kennedy has made a significant rise since implementing smaller classes, its scores nearly doubling.

"Thirty kids in a classroom in the 21st century, there's something wrong with that school," says Charles Wilson, whose son attends Kennedy. "They aren't learning anything."

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Sen. Jim King, a former president of the Florida Senate, is one lawmaker who thinks facts can matter to Florida voters, if they hear them. He has called before for limiting the state's class-size program to K-3, and may do it again this year.

But that would run against the grain of another effort Republican lawmakers are pushing.

That proposal asks voters to maintain class sizes based on district averages - as is the case now - but not allow any classroom to exceed the mandated limit by more than five. It also would allow schools to use team-teaching, which reduces the need for new classrooms. The state Department of Education opposes the practice when used for class-size purposes.

Finally, to show voters they aren't just giving something up, the proposal would require schools to spend no less than 65 percent of their budgets "in the classroom," a term that has yet to be defined.

Rep. Joe Pickens, chairman of the House Education Appropriations Committee, says the proposal would allow Florida schools to be more flexible.

A district could have smaller classes for needy students while having larger ones where children don't need as much attention, says Rep. John Stargel, a Lakeland Republican who heads the House Education Choice and Innovation Committee.

Class sizes would still be capped at five above the district average, Pickens says, effectively ending the days of 40 children in a classroom.

Each point, however, falls short of what the research says is most effective.

Experts agree there should be some degree of flexibility in class sizes. But they argue vociferously against using district averages, saying they can be used to mask classroom-by-classroom reality.

"That's a gimmick," says Webb, of the University of Wisconsin, "because schools can subvert the process."

They also side with the Florida Department of Education's position that team teaching should not be used for class size reduction.

Teachers typically don't know how to team effectively, says Graue of the University of Wisconsin. So you often see them tag-teaming instead.

"Thirty kids and two teachers is oftentimes chaos," Finn says. "It's not a small class."

Pickens' bill is just one of many emerging as lawmakers seek to find a political calculus that works. Scaling the amendment back to K-3 or K-5 is out there, too. Some argue that fourth and fifth grades

should be included to stop schools from creating large classes there to meet the requirements in the lower grades.

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Meek, the amendment's backer, wonders why lawmakers are even talking about changes. They should just fund class size, he says, rather than grant billions in unrequested tax breaks.

Pickens says the state would be wise to direct its resources to where it can do the most good. Tax breaks for homeowners are part of the mix, he says, because people are clamoring for relief as much or more than they want class size reductions.

Besides, he notes, Florida's parents - unlike those in parts of California - have not indicated a willingness to make the sacrifices needed for smaller class sizes to work. Instead of accepting year-round education, for instance, some have called for longer summer breaks.

Some statehouse watchers have suggested that this year might be the final chance to change the amendment, before school averages take effect and people really start to like smaller classes.

Pickens isn't so sure.

"I can't say that it would never happen, because who knows what the pain of 2010 and 2011 will do to change the attitudes of people if it doesn't happen this time," Pickens says, referring to when actual class sizes will be counted. "In 2010-11, the change will be so onerous that maybe the day will arrive that you're at the courthouse steps."

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