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Unified debates importance of class size

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RACINE - Racine Unified officials have proposed two building referendums as one piece of the puzzle that could raise student achievement. The argument goes that building new schools and remodeling old ones could help achievement by creating smaller class sizes.

But does class size really make a difference when it comes to learning?

Unified officials say a switch to smaller classes could have a positive impact but education experts at some universities say good teachers matter much more than class size reduction, a costly effort that can backfire.

"This is not a policy that in general makes sense from an economic or educational standpoint," said Eric Hanushek, a fellow at Stanford University and author of research and books on how teacher quality and class sizes impact student achievement. "Your school district is making this very expensive by proposing to build new schools, then add new teachers and other support."

A December reinvesting plan from Unified calls for two building referendums that include three new elementary schools and other converted or rebuilt facilities, which would reduce kindergarten and first-grade classes to 13 students per teacher and second- to fifth-grade classes to 26 students per teacher. Those target numbers are based on research showing class sizes should be less than 15 and that small class sizes are more important in early grades, said Unified Superintendent James Shaw.

Some Unified schools already have student-teacher ratios of 15 to 1, but that is not consistent across the district, Shaw said, adding that class size is just one component in a much larger district improvement plan. Several public presentations about the plan emphasized class size though.

Experts were skeptical smaller class sizes would change things in Unified. Several said smaller class sizes stand a chance of improving student achievement in Racine, but only if accompanied by professional development that shows teachers how to interact with a smaller group successfully.

"It depends so much on teachers and their training in the size given," said Joan Whipp, an associate professor of educational policy and leadership at Marquette University and a teacher for 18 years. "It's is all up to what the teacher can do."

And a teacher's ability and habits can be hard to change.

"If a teacher has been teaching a class of 26 for 30 years, thinking about how to teach in a different way to accommodate 13 children requires some support," said Beth Graue, professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and associate director of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. "If they continue to teach the same way as they did with 26, you won't see a difference."

But if done right, small classes can be worth it. Immediate benefits include better teacher assessment, more meaningful relationships between teachers and parents and more tailoring of lessons to individual students or small groups, which all help raise student achievement, said Shaw and Graue.

Long-term benefits can also abound.

Studies show additional long-term effects - students placed in smaller elementary school classes later have a much higher graduation rate and consistently outperform peers on standardized tests even when placed back in large classes, said Jeremy Finn, education professor at State University of New York at Buffalo and a statistician for several class size studies.

Finn said those benefits can come even without properly trained teachers, which happened in a study featuring thousands of new teachers in California. But, Graue said California has backed away from small class sizes because of the high expense of the project.

Shaw was already aware of such trends and of experts' concerns, and agreed class sizes are not as important as teachers. That's why to help teachers and improve instruction - with or without a building referendum - the district has already started using data-driven teaching, individual school improvement plans, teacher coaches and student tutoring.

"Small class sizes," he said, "are one element."

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