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Budget cuts lead to larger classes in Missouri, Kansas

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Danielle Wagner is teaching 25 fourth-graders this year at Sunnyside Elementary in Olathe.

That's a bigger class than last year, and next year could be bigger yet.

"This is the first year I've had a lot of kids," Wagner said. "I feel like I am still able to teach the same way, although I don't know if I'm quite able to do one on one as much as I would like."

That's a growing concern as Kansas and Missouri districts cut millions of dollars from their budgets. Fewer teachers means bigger classes - and teachers aren't the only ones who are worried.

Parents fear that growing class sizes could mean less attention for their children and more stress on the teachers, making them less effective.

"I've talked to parents who are concerned about the situation," said Lauren Meyer, the president of the Shawnee Mission area PTA council. "There's a lot of conversation about this."

Parents already are talking about ways they can volunteer more as the teaching and support staff dwindles.

Class sizes are widely considered a signal of the quality of education. Although some people may remember sitting with 30 classmates in elementary school decades ago, the optimum class size is 17, according to many experts.

Class sizes in many area districts are in the low 20s and growing. Some will be near 30 next year.

In the 2007-08 school year, the national average was 20.3 students per elementary class and 23 for secondary classes, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

That puts the United States about in the middle among the world's schools.

Class sizes will continue to be a concern as education money dries up.

Kansas school districts have seen the state cut \$200 million over the past year, while Missouri has cut \$30.3 million for elementary and secondary education.

Consequently, many school districts have been cutting budgets and staff.

For example, the Shawnee Mission School District cut 50 teacher positions this year and is proposing to cut 82 next year.

The Shawnee Mission, Blue Valley and Olathe districts already have announced that classes will be growing next year because of the anticipated budget reductions.

Area districts in Missouri appear to be in better financial shape, but as the budget picture continues to darken, school officials are becoming increasingly worried.

The Independence School District already has cut about 40 teaching positions, while Lee's Summit cut 14. Kansas City eliminated 120 positions this year and expects to cut 285 next year while closing 26 schools. Classes, however, are expected to remain relatively small.

Meanwhile, North Kansas City is expected to grow next year by 370 students.

"We are expecting to add teachers next year," said Mary Jo Burton, a district spokeswoman, adding that they will be needed to keep class sizes in check.

Research shows that small classes can yield considerable benefits for students. The ideal class size varies by grade and school, but some education officials ideally would have no more than 17 students in each class.

A prominent study called the Student Teacher Achievement Ratio conducted among Tennessee schoolchildren in the late 1980s concluded that students in classes of 13 to 17 students academically outperformed those in larger classes.

Researchers studied children in kindergarten through third grade. They later tracked the children's subsequent test scores and found lasting positive effects.

"The biggest thing that happened is that the kids become better students. They can't hide in the back corner. They have to pay attention. They're a little more supportive of each other," said Jeremy Finn, who analyzed data for the study and is a professor of education at the University at Buffalo-SUNY. "Misbehavior goes way down in small classes."

But study results must be weighed carefully.

"There is strong evidence about the importance of class size in the early grades," said Robert Slavin, director of the Center for Research and Reform in Education.

However, Slavin said, there is little data to support the idea that small class sizes have a big effect in secondary grade levels. In addition, adding one or two students to a class may not be as devastating as some parents fear.

"The evidence is very weak that small differences in class size make any difference in student achievement," Slavin said.

Yet Slavin acknowledges small classes have other benefits that can't be easily quantified.

"Personally, I would want my kids to be in a smaller class, and I think every parent would," he said.

Some economists have argued that without evidence to support achievement increases at all levels, the considerable money needed to create classes with 17 students would be better spent elsewhere.

And while class size matters to many parents, it's hardly the only component to a successful classroom.

Effective teachers are the most important ingredient to overcoming the disadvantages of large classes, experts believe, and adding teachers might not be the magical solution in every situation. An ineffective teacher doesn't get better simply because classes are smaller.

Other studies have backed up the findings in Tennessee, but the work seems to indicate that the effects of class sizes are the most profound for children in certain populations, including minorities, low-income students and those learning English as a second language. Having as many as 19 students in at-risk classrooms could lessen student achievement, studies have shown.

Class size is of greater concern today than it was in the 1950s, said Dale Dennis, a deputy commissioner of education in Kansas.

Back then, the high school graduation rate was about 50 percent, and there was less emphasis, he said, on getting failing students to succeed.

"At that time you could drop out of high school and still get a pretty good job on a production line," he said. "Those jobs aren't there anymore."

Cutting teachers is almost always the easiest way to save money, but educators worry how great the cost will be to student achievement.

Blue Valley could save \$1.1 million by increasing elementary class size guidelines by two students, which goes a long way toward plugging the \$6.25 million budget hole the district is facing. Board members will make a final decision on cuts April 5.

Gene Johnson, the Shawnee Mission superintendent, predicted that most classes next year will grow to be at the middle of the guidelines range, which is 16 to 28 at the elementary level. Some classes, he added, will be in the upper part of that range. Classes are predicted to grow at the secondary level as well.

The Kansas Department of Education said student-teacher ratios increased this year, and a further increase is predicted for next year as teaching positions are reduced.

Educators worry that the cuts will set back efforts to help failing students and hamper efforts to meet the federal mandate of having every child proficient in math and reading by 2014.

Sheryl Siegele, president of the Shawnee Mission chapter of the National Education Association, said the larger the class, the harder it is to "help the kid at the bottom."

She said the ideal number of students in a remedial class is about 17.

"If it gets over 19, you may be able to cover this year's curriculum and keep those kids where they were so they don't fall behind," she said. "You can do that with 19 to 24, but you're not going to remediate."

Teachers worry especially for academically challenged students, said Jean Goodman, an art teacher in the Shawnee Mission district.

"It's pretty difficult for teachers," said Goodman, who teaches at Rhein Benninghoven Elementary in Shawnee. "They get pretty emotional about it."

Kansas City, Kan., school board president Gloria Willis, who has worked as an elementary school teacher and principal, knows firsthand that class size makes a difference.

Decades ago, she taught a class of 43 students made up of 38 third-graders and five second-graders at Hawthorne Elementary.

"When you have that many children in a classroom, you cannot do individualized instruction. Children who need extra help just don't get it," she said. "There are children who are not going to master the skills that they need to master in a classroom of that size."

The district increased class size slightly last year, but it was not something Willis approved lightly.

Willis said she gets especially concerned about the district's at-risk middle and high school students getting lost in the shuffle or dropping out.

"The high school children, believe it or not, I feel need more attention because they are at the stage where they feel 'Nobody cares about me. Nobody cares about my future,'" she said.

The situation has the attention of parents, too.

Kansas City, Kan., mother Serena Bales took her children out of a private school because she couldn't afford it anymore.

When she learned class sizes would be increasing and supply cuts were in store this year in the Kansas City, Kan., district, Bales took note. She watched for signs of stress among the teachers at John Fiske Elementary, but so far she's satisfied that teachers can handle the workload.

"It's concerning," she said. "As of yet, I haven't seen the number surge so much that it concerns me."

Karen Wagner, who has a son in the sixth grade at John Diemer Elementary in Overland Park, said parents are prepared to rally around their schools.

"We have tremendous parent volunteers who come into the classrooms and help teachers, especially at the elementary level," she said, adding that she expects that to pick up.

Schools need parents and community members to help, Willis said, especially now.

A parent stepping in the door can drastically change children's attitudes and their desire to listen and learn, she said, even if "you don't do anything but just come and walk them to the cafeteria or listen to a child who needs that extra ear for reading."

"There are things that volunteers in those buildings can assist those teachers in and let the teachers be the teachers."

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