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Tight Budgets Mean Squeeze in Classrooms

By SAM DILLON

Millions of public school students across the nation are seeing their class sizes swell because of budget cuts and teacher layoffs, undermining a decades-long push by parents, administrators and policy makers to shrink class sizes.

Over the past two years, California, Georgia, Nevada, Ohio, Utah and Wisconsin have loosened legal restrictions on class size. And Idaho and Texas are debating whether to fit more students in classrooms.

Los Angeles has increased the average size of its ninth-grade English and math classes to 34 from 20. Eleventh- and 12th-grade classes in those two subjects have risen, on average, to 43 students.

“Because many states are facing serious budget gaps, we’ll see more increases this fall,” said Marguerite Roza, a University of Washington professor who has studied the recession’s impact on schools.

The increases are reversing a trend toward smaller classes that stretches back decades. Since the 1980s, teachers and many other educators have embraced research finding that smaller classes foster higher achievement.

Rachael Maher, a math teacher in Charlotte, N.C., said she had experienced the difference between smaller and larger classes. She has watched her seventh-grade classes grow since her school system ran into budget trouble three years ago. Before, her classes averaged 25 students; this year they average 31.

“They say it doesn’t affect whether kids get what they need, but I completely d
Maher said. “If you’ve gained five kids, that’s five more papers to grade, five r
need makeup work if they’re absent, five more parents to contact, five more e
answer. It gets overwhelming.”

In Detroit, the authorities are so overwhelmed by financial troubles that they are debating a deficit-reduction proposal that would increase high school class sizes to 60 students. Michigan's state superintendent of public instruction, Michael P. Flanagan, said that the plan was unlikely to be put into effect, but that "class sizes will be higher than you and I would like."

In New York City, average elementary class sizes have grown to 23.7 students from 21.8 since 2008, according to official data.

In Utah, one of the few states that collect class size data each year, median class size has increased by several students in many grade levels since 2008. It now ranges from 22 students in kindergarten to 31 students in high school chemistry classes.

"All the budget cuts have started our class sizes on that climb upward," said Judy W. Park, associate superintendent of the State Office of Education in Utah. "During the last two years, our schools have really seen it."

Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, said a number of surveys had shown that parents cared more about small classes than anything except school safety.

But budget cuts are forcing schools to raise class sizes, putting those who advocate shrinking them on the defensive.

Leonie Haimson, executive director of Class Size Matters, a group that presses for smaller classes in New York and nationally, said many states enacted policies limiting student numbers during the late 1980s and 1990s.

"But now, in the majority of states, you're seeing definite increases in class sizes because of the recession and budget cuts," Ms. Haimson said. "Unfortunately we've also seen the rise of a narrative that's become dominant in education reform that insists that class size doesn't matter."

Research that convinced many policy makers of the benefits of small classes was conducted in Tennessee.

Helen Bain, who served as the president of the nation's largest teachers union in the 1970s, became a strong advocate for the idea. When she was a seventh-grade teacher early in her career, Ms. Bain recalled, her students learned quickly in classes of 15 or 20 students, but less

effectively as class sizes grew.

“When it got to 35, I told the principal, ‘I can’t teach this many children,’ ” she said.

In the 1980s, Ms. Bain persuaded Tennessee lawmakers to finance a study comparing classes of 13 to 17 students in kindergarten through third grade with classes of 22 to 25 students. The smaller classes significantly outscored the larger classes on achievement tests.

In the decades since, researchers, including the Princeton economist Alan Krueger, have conducted studies that they say confirm and strengthen the validity of the Tennessee findings.

Others, including Eric Hanushek, a Stanford economist, have argued that the impact of small classes on achievement has been exaggerated and that giving students a skillful teacher is more cost-effective.

Those who support that notion include Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who last Sunday told governors gathered in Washington to consider paying bonuses to the best teachers to take on extra students.

Mr. Duncan said he would prefer to put his own school-age children in a classroom with 28 students led by a “fantastic teacher” than in one with 23 and a “mediocre” teacher.

Bill Gates made a similar argument to the governors, portraying the movement to reduce class sizes as one of the most expensive and fruitless efforts in American education.

The federal Department of Education collects nationwide class size data every few years, and the average has declined steadily for half a century. In 1961, the average elementary school class had 29 students, and the average high school class had 28. In 2007-8, the most recent year with data, the elementary school average was 20, and the high school average was 23.4.

Dr. Roza, who is an adviser to Mr. Gates, said she had measured a recent decline of half a percent in the total number of employees in American public education. “That’s meant some growth,” she said, but average class sizes have not ballooned.

“Maybe the national average went up one kid,” Dr. Roza said. “But I don’t think we’ve jumped to 30 kids per class.”

The nationwide movement to shrink classes dates to the early 1980s, when Texas passed a law limiting class sizes, to 22 students in elementary grades. Tennessee followed with class-size reduction measures for the early grades.

In 1996, California lawmakers approved a measure to reduce class sizes to 20 for kindergarten through third grade. Today, more than 30 states have some form of programs to reduce class sizes.

But many have been challenged since the recession.

In Texas, the state comptroller in December proposed loosening the class size limit, saying it could save $558 million in teacher salaries. That proposal has found backers in a Legislature that is weighing $10 billion in cuts from public education over two years, but teachers and parent groups are outraged.

In California, which has spent about $20 billion on a class-size reduction program, state officials deferred financing for it in 2009 and reduced penalties to districts that allowed average classes to grow above the limits.

In Florida, where voters in 2002 approved a ballot initiative amending the State Constitution to cap elementary classes at 18 students and high schools at 25, the authorities are struggling with those limits.

“If an elementary gets a 19th student during the year, they have to hire a teacher and split the class, and that makes no sense,” said Wayne Blanton, executive director of the Florida School Boards Association.

In November, a ballot initiative that asked voters to repeal class-size limits won a majority, but it fell short of the 60 percent required to overturn a constitutional amendment.

As of late last year, Florida school districts had accumulated $41 million in penalties for exceeding the caps. Palm Beach County’s penalty alone totaled $16.6 million.

This year districts have been appealing the penalties, and state officials have reduced many. Florida lawmakers are debating ways of giving school systems more flexibility without violating the law.