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## UP FRONT | FLORIDA SCHOOLS

# Smaller classes often exist only on paper

The state's formula for calculating class size often shows small classes on paper. The reality can be very different.

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Gov. Jeb Bush revived the debate over class size last week -- arguing that the voter-approved mandate to shrink class size is too strict and too expensive.

But quietly, some school districts are exploiting loopholes in the state's formula for calculating class size, exaggerating their progress in making classes smaller. In some cases, schools are shoe-horning more children into classrooms -- even as they meet state requirements.

In Broward County, for example, one third of all elementary schools still put more than 35 students into at least one classroom, a Herald analysis shows. And in Miami-Dade, high schools such as Carol City, American and Coral Gables pack as many as 60 students into some classrooms, according to district records.

Many school districts have the money to hire teachers but can't afford to build classrooms. So administrators have taken advantage of loopholes in the state formula, which does not actually measure class size, but rather the ratio of students to teachers in each classroom. Here is what they are doing:

- Mainstreaming special-education students, which has the ancillary benefit of reducing class size, at least on paper. If the special-education teacher is counted as a second teacher, the student/teacher ratio is cut in half.

- Having a specialist -- such as a reading teacher -- visit a classroom for one period, which reduces the student/teacher ratio for that period, and thus for the day. Since class-size data are collected on a specific day each week, schools can reduce their reported ratio by scheduling specialists in large classes on that day.

- Pulling students out of class for tutoring, speech therapy or other special help on the day of the count.

- Putting two classes in one room, with two teachers, who can ``team-teach."

At Hallandale Elementary for example, the state of Florida says teacher Danielle Eberly's class has 18 first-graders.

### TEAM TEACHING

But when Eberly is standing before her class, she's speaking to 36 children, not 18. As Eberly teaches, her co-teacher, LoriAyne Stickler, might be doing paperwork, or walking around the room to make sure her youngsters understand the lesson. Then the two reverse roles.

"We teach to our strengths," Stickler said. ``Whoever is in charge of the classroom, the other person does support. The second teacher is an extra set of eyes, to make sure students are getting it. I can't imagine going back to my own class."

Some parents have been pleasantly surprised by team-teaching, while others believe they are being cheated.

Miramar parent Lisa Tervo never imagined there would be 40 students in a class more than two years after she voted for the class-size amendment.

The biggest problems: increased noise, and the difficulty of ensuring everyone can see the board.

"For some kids it's OK, but others need a lot fewer kids in the classroom," said Tervo, whose two children attend Silver Shores Elementary in Miramar.

There, five two-teacher classrooms hold 34, 46, 49, 48 and 50 children, according to school district records. "There are parents who aren't happy about this, even though the school is doing all it can," Tervo said.

According to state records, roughly one in five Broward teachers are sharing a classroom, often as a team or with a specialist giving extra help. In Miami-Dade, it's roughly one in six. That's in line with most Florida school districts.

"If you have 40 kids in a classroom with two teachers, there are 40 kids in the classroom," said Charles Achilles, a professor of educational leadership at Seton Hall University and Eastern Michigan University. ``Pupil-teacher ratio is not the same thing as class size."

### SPECIAL EDUCATION

Educators have praised the practice of consolidating special-education students -- and their teachers -- into regular classes as a way to raise awareness of students with disabilities among other children, and to boost self-esteem for disabled students.

But it also skews the numbers. A class of 27 students and three special-education students -- 30 altogether -- can be reported as two classes of 15, if the special-education teacher is available to all students.

The practice -- called "mainstreaming" -- is used at numerous schools, including Miami's Edison Middle, which has 39 periods of co-teaching, according to district records.

"You can't tell which students are in special education and which students aren't," said Edison Principal Onetha Gilliard, who believes the benefits of an extra teacher outweigh the additional students. ``The second teacher is there for everyone."

Said Gisella Feild, who handles class-size data for Miami-Dade: ``We are very strict about using those teachers for co-teaching. They have to be there for all the students. The problem is we don't have enough classroom space."

But some educators say it's unrealistic to think that a teacher whose primary job is to teach students with special needs will have adequate time for the rest of the class.

Another method for reducing class size is to factor in specialist teachers, who can visit a classroom for part of the day, cutting the official number of students per teacher in half during that time.

Similarly, students who are pulled out of a classroom for special tutoring or other help reduce the size of their class. West Hollywood Elementary principal Dennis Scullio said pull-outs are sound educationally, but also help the numbers.

"If you need to go down a few-tenths of a student to make your goals, it can help," he said.

Ralph Eckhardt, a field representative of the Broward Teachers Union, said teachers have complained.

"Teachers are telling us the way class sizes are being calculated aren't accurate," Eckhardt said. ``We've looked into it, and everything that's being done is legal."

Miami-Dade's average prekindergarten through third-grade class is the state's largest at 24, down from 30 three years ago. In Broward, it's down to 19 from 25 three years ago.

But Broward now has 18 elementary schools with 40 or more children in classrooms that were designed for a single class. Those schools might be using co-teaching, or they might have used temporary dividers, such as office partitions, to split the rooms.

Central Park Elementary in Plantation has classrooms with 34, 34, 35, 36, 37, 37 and 39 students.

Coral Way Elementary in Miami started team-teaching this year because of the class-size amendment, though principal Pablo Ortiz has tried to keep classes relatively small.

"Our biggest has 31 students," Ortiz said. ``That's not too bad. It doesn't get too noisy."

Miami-Dade's large, two-teacher classrooms are concentrated in middle and high schools, according to data sent to the state.

### STATE'S COST

New construction dollars dedicated to class-size reduction have been a fraction of the \$5 billion Gov. Jeb Bush said the amendment would cost in its first two years as he campaigned to defeat it in the fall of 2002. Florida schools have received roughly \$800 million.

Bush wants to scale back the amendment by requiring districts to meet the numeric goals as a districtwide average, rather than class-by-class, as the amendment stated. Most Florida school systems already have met that goal.

Some schools will get relief when new schools or additions are built. But overall, the use of team-teaching could increase, as more stringent class-size goals kick in.

"We started it this year with five classrooms," said Maureen Hobart-Eves, an eighth-grade math teacher at Perry Middle in Miramar. ``And I'm sure we'll be doing it more next year."