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Support shrinks for special class-size vote

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Last update: April 22, 2005

TALLAHASSEE -- Florida senators appear ready to kill a controversial proposal that calls for holding a special election to try to scale back a 2002 constitutional amendment requiring smaller school class sizes.

"I think all notions of special elections are dead," Senate President Tom Lee, R-Brandon, said Thursday.

Gov. Jeb Bush and some key lawmakers, including Senate Education Chairwoman Evelyn Lynn, R-Ormond Beach, have sought to hold a special election as early as September to try to short-circuit the amendment, which is costing the state hundreds of millions of additional dollars each year.

As a trade-off for scaling back the class-size requirements, Bush has proposed raising minimum teacher salaries to \$35,000 a year. But the proposal has drawn opposition from the Florida Education Association teachers union and Democratic lawmakers, who say the state should carry out the 2002 vote.

The special election also has run into a major legal obstacle, because 75 percent of lawmakers would need to approve holding such an election. Though they are in the minority, Democrats have enough votes in the House and Senate to block it.

For example, Democrats hold 14 of the 40 seats in the Senate, where the proposal would need 30 votes to pass.

"I don't think you could get to 30," said Sen. Jim King, a Jacksonville Republican whose district includes parts of Volusia and Flagler counties.

But Lee and other lawmakers also have questioned the idea of deciding the class-size issue in a special election, when voter turnout would likely be low. A special election also would cost at least \$18.5 million.

"It wouldn't take a great deal of discernment to determine September '05 is not a maximum voter-turnout period," said Sen. Rod Smith, D-Gainesville.

Even if a special election is killed, lawmakers could still put the issue on the November 2006 regular-election ballot. Sixty percent of lawmakers would have to agree to that.

The 2002 amendment, which passed with 52 percent of the vote, requires the state to gradually reduce class sizes throughout this decade. In 2010, prekindergarten- through third-grade classes cannot have more than 18 students; fourth- through eighth-grade classes cannot have more than 22; and ninth- through 12th-grade classes cannot have more than 25.

Bush's plan, which would need to be approved by voters because it would change the constitution, would scale back the requirements by allowing counties to meet them based on average districtwide class sizes. Volusia County already meets Bush's proposed requirements.

Bush has always opposed the 2002 amendment, arguing that it forces the state to spend too much on class sizes and not enough on other needs such as teacher pay. He would use savings from scaling back the amendment to impose the \$35,000 minimum salary and give at least \$2,000 raises to all teachers.

Lynn said Thursday that a special election would allow the state to boost salaries of teachers more quickly. She acknowledged "it is not looking encouraging" but said a special election this year remains possible.

"Nothing's dead until it's really dead," Lynn said.

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