

# Smaller Classes Under Scrutiny In Calif. Schools

BY JOETTA L. SACK

Riding a wave of fiscal good times, California in 1996 launched an ambitious statewide push to lower class sizes in the crucial elementary grades. Though the idea faced skeptics and plenty of challenges, parents, teachers, and administrators declared it a great, common-sense idea whose time had come.

That effort, which has cost the state \$8 billion so far, helped fuel a nationwide movement to curb crowded classrooms. Today, some 40 states have such initiatives, and federal money for class-size reduction is available as well.

Now, as an era of hearty budget surpluses has given way to leaner times, some California districts are taking a hard look at whether smaller classes are worth the hefty price tag.

Last month, as part of a \$5.3 million budget-cutting move, the 24,000-student Irvine Unified School District abandoned

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STATE CAPITALS

## Pay Costs, Competing Interests May Undercut Calif. Program

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its class-size-reduction plan for kindergarten and grades 2 and 3, while keeping the program in the 1st grades—saving more than \$764,000 this year.

Irvine may soon have some company. Several other California districts facing budget shortfalls are thinking about eliminating part or all of their class-size programs.

"Unless something happens where the governor chooses to rescue the initiative, it will die a slow death," said Superintendent James A. Fleming of the Capistrano Unified district, which has found that the state's share of the funding is simply not enough to pay for rising teacher salaries. Smaller class sizes require bigger teacher workforces. "The districts that will survive the longest," he said, "are those with the lowest teacher salaries."

Kevin Gordon, the executive director of the California Association of School Business Officials, said, "There are very few [districts] who are talking about eliminating it entirely, but there are a number who are talking about trimming it back."

Irvine Unified's decision comes as a new report finds that two-thirds of California's districts have been forced to siphon funding from programs such as libraries and professional development to pay for smaller classes. The RAND Corp., an independent research group based in Santa Monica, Calif., released the report earlier this month.

"Up until now, districts have gone as fast as they can to implement [class-size reduction] as soon as possible," said Brian Stecher, an author of the report. "But there have been costs associated with that."

While Irvine has made headlines for its decision, Mr. Stecher noted that one district's action doesn't constitute a trend. "I wouldn't say it's a movement yet, but we wanted to raise it as an issue to be monitored carefully."

Meanwhile, in Sacramento, the state capital, officials are standing firmly behind the program.

Doug Stone, the communica-

tions director for the California Department of Education, said the program remains popular. He rejected the idea that there is a move back to the days of old, when districts that wanted to shrink class sizes had to do so on their own. According to state data, 99 percent of eligible districts share in the \$1.6 billion allotted for the program this school year.

"It is unfortunate that a few districts in the state are backing away," he said. "But we still have the overwhelming majority of districts participating."

### Terrible Dilemma

Even one district's pullout from the popular program, however, is bound to raise eyebrows. After all, the class-size initiative was one of the biggest bonanzas in years for public schools in the Golden State.

A regular combatant with public school advocates, then-Gov. Pete Wilson, a Republican, championed the idea of using surplus state funds to lower class sizes to 20 pupils or fewer—from an average of about 29—in grades K-3. That plan eased severe overcrowding in the early elementary grades, but by all accounts it also exacerbated teacher and space shortages, particularly in urban areas. (See *Education Week*, April 30, 1997.)

Today, facing severe budget crunches during a recession, districts are being prompted to revisit their earlier decisions. In Irvine, the decision to move to larger classes was debated for months. District officials say the class-size program has helped improve the classroom climate and has proved popular. But other programs that district leaders believed were equally or more beneficial to student achievement were at risk of being cut because of a lack of funding.

"This was a terrible dilemma," said Deputy Superintendent Dean Waldfoegel. "It's a very politically appealing program and certainly has benefits to students—there's no question about that. But the program is a significant encroachment against the [budget]."

Irvine Unified has had to supplement the state class-size aid all along because the state share gave only enough money to hire entry-level teachers. Mr. Waldfoegel said the district hired some new teachers, but also found that many veteran teachers wanted to move to the early grades to enjoy the smaller classes.

Then, even though the state share of spending for the program has increased from \$650 per pupil in 1996 to \$900 currently, the higher aid level hasn't kept pace with the rising teacher salaries in the state, he said.

As a result, the district's class size in grades 4 and 5 rose to an average of 32 students, and to 35 students in grades 7-12. Had it not moved from class-size reduction, the classes would have grown even more, Mr. Waldfoegel said. In addition, the district had already done away with popular programs such as music and art to continue the smaller classes.

As part of the decision to trim the program, the district cut personnel costs by laying off a still-to-be-determined number of teachers.

Mr. Fleming of Capistrano Unified said he would recommend his district eliminate its 3rd grade program next year because the district's costs keep rising. Capistrano's share of the class-size-reduction costs has more than doubled, from 10 percent to 24 percent, mainly due to increased teacher salaries. The 46,400-student district has also steadily increased class sizes in upper grades to keep the program afloat, Mr. Fleming added.

"There is some resentment of

class-size reduction being supported on the back of teachers in grades 4 to 12," Mr. Fleming said.

### A Better Way?

Michael Cohen, who as an adviser to President Clinton helped craft the federal class-size-reduction initiative, said the Clinton administration had carefully studied California's program before coming up with its own pro-

and Mr. Berliner, the regents' professor of psychology in education at Arizona State University.

Mr. Stone of the California education department countered that the state's per-pupil share of the program's cost is adequate, and that many districts do not have to supplement it with local money.

### Concern Spreading

Another issue up for debate in California is whether recent increases in state assessment scores were a direct result of the class-size initiative. It's impossible to tell, according to Mr. Stecher of RAND, because the state launched several other education initiatives at the same time. The RAND study did find that while the teachers in the smaller classes reported spending more individual time with students, there had not been any fundamental changes in content or methods of instruction in the early grades.

But state Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin believes that class-size reduction has helped raise scores on state exams, Mr. Stone said.

"I don't think we've ever made the contention that increased test scores are a result of class-size reduction, but the reality is, those scores are up," he said.

In the meantime, several districts report that the program remains popular locally.

Officials in the 723,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District have discussed ending its class-size-reduction program. So far, however, the program hasn't been seriously threatened, said Esther Wong, the assistant superintendent for planning, assessment, and research.

"We are looking at it as a possibility, but it's something we really don't want to do," she said of curtailing the program.

Despite the program's challenges, district leaders believe smaller classes have helped raise achievement, she added.

Teachers, of course, are by and large supportive of California's program. It's no surprise, then, that officials of the National Education Association are worried that other states and districts facing tight budgets will also choose to do away with their class-size-reduction programs—or at least begin to trim them back.

Under the Bush administration, meanwhile, there has been a shift in emphasis on the federal front. This year, the federal program was changed to allow states much more flexibility in spending the money, not necessarily just to hire teachers and reduce class sizes, as had been the sole goal of the Clinton initiative.

"We're very concerned" about the future of class-size-reduction programs, said Darryl Lynette Figueroa, a spokeswoman for the 2.5-million member NEA. "It really has been the key to successful school reform."



Christy Smith, a 2nd grade teacher in the Irvine, Calif., school district, will face a 33 percent increase in the size of her class—provided she doesn't get laid off first.

posal. Mr. Cohen found that while California strictly mandated the maximum number of pupils in districts that opted into the program, it did not provide enough money for districts to reach the smaller sizes.

Moreover, Mr. Cohen said, the state did not target money to high-poverty districts. As a result, the program steered droves of highly qualified teachers to new jobs in affluent districts, he said.

"We learned what not to do," Mr. Cohen said. "All of those things conspire to create significant problems, especially in cities."

Researchers Bruce J. Biddle and David C. Berliner echo those thoughts in recent report, "Small Class Size and Its Effects," published this month by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

They conclude that the California program inflicted serious problems on districts, particularly poor and urban districts. First, the state failed to conduct a pilot program. In addition, the researchers say, California's 20-student cap was inadequate in light of studies showing that the optimum class size is even lower.

"In many ways, the California initiative has provided a near-textbook case of how a state should not reduce class size," write Mr. Biddle, a professor emeritus of psychology and sociology at the University of Missouri,