

The North Carolina General Assembly included new class size restrictions for grades K-3 in the 2017-18 budget, requiring school districts to reduce those classes while simultaneously taking away the funding flexibility districts have long relied upon to fund enhancement teachers, for art, music, PE and world languages, in those schools (HB13). The only funding for those positions was districts' flexibility to use the classroom teacher allotment for enhancement teachers. The combined effect was a massive unfunded mandate that would have required larger districts to find new classroom space and teachers and districts of all sizes to reduce their enhancement staffing. Legislative analysts warned lawmakers that these complications would arise if class sizes and allotment usage were restricted in this manner.

In the ensuing months, as school districts commenced planning for the 2017-18 academic year, the problem became less theoretical and districts were on the verge of layoffs and staff restructurings that were unpopular with parents. The NC House unanimously passed a bill that would have allowed average district-wide class sizes up to three students above the funded student-teacher ratio, and individual classes of up to six students above the new limits in order to restore the flexibility districts historically used to fund enhancement positions. However, NC Senate leaders accused districts of having misspent "tens of millions of dollars" (though clearly no House members shared those concerns) and refused to vote on the bill. Instead, the new legislative budget simply delayed the class size restrictions for one year and imposed onerous, duplicative reporting requirements on district officials.

In October 2017, lawmakers returned to Raleigh for a special session to pass budget corrections and override vetoes. The NC House included class size flexibility in its bill, but the NC Senate did not, and that version passed both chambers. The class size chaos problem will continue until at least January 2018 when the General Assembly will return for (presumably) the last meeting of the 2017 long session. After that, legislators will adjourn until the 2018 short session begins in late spring.

Now, as planning for the 2018-19 school year approaches, the unfunded mandate is threatening districts once again. District leaders still have only three options to achieve the unfunded restrictions, none of them truly workable.

- 1) Eliminate enhancement positions and redeploy those teachers or lay them off – which is difficult since enhancement classes are required by law as part of a sound, basic education.
- 2) Move classroom teachers from grades 4-12 to teach the newly created K-3 classes and allow those upper grade class sizes to balloon since they have no legislatively imposed limits. This is obviously not an effective use of highly skilled teachers who specialize in different age groups.
- 3) Raise local revenue to hire the required teachers. This will be almost impossible for disadvantaged districts, and also for wealthier, large districts which will already be spending enormous new sums to create new classroom space for the required K-3 classes.

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