



The Cost of Reducing Classroom Size

September 2, 2003

Florida voters approved a constitutional amendment requiring a reduction in the number of students per classroom in an effort to improve Florida's public education system. The amendment requires that by 2010 classrooms have no more than 18 students in grades K-3, 22 students in grades 4-8, and 25 per class for grades 9-12. The amendment also mandates that the State come up with new money to fund these reductions and not shuffle around existing funds. Finally, the amendment requires a gradual reduction in classroom size beginning this year, reducing the number of students in all classes by 2.

The Florida Board of Education has estimated that it will cost \$517 million for the 2004-05 year and over \$1 billion in 2005-06 to comply with the constitutional mandate. And that is just the cost for the new teachers; it does not include the costs of the new schools that will have to be constructed. The local school boards must bear that cost, unless new State monies are provided.

And this is just the beginning. I estimate that the total program will cost \$3 billion per year over the upcoming decade. So now the squawking is beginning. The Board of Education has called for a repeal of the amendment, but it is prohibited from taking political actions. The Governor and the Speaker of the House have also called for repeal, but so far they have made no efforts to do so. This leaves the taxpayers.

As I have said before, there are really only two sources of revenue that can fund this massive program: an increase in the State sales tax, or higher property taxes. At the state level, the sales tax can be raised by a penny to pay for the program, or the sales tax base can be expanded to various services to fund the requirements. Alternatively, school property taxes can be increased by the State. No matter which policy is selected, taxpayers will certainly pay more in the short run. And this is, perhaps, not a bad outcome.

The voters demanded smaller class sizes and improvements in education, and they are getting them. Over 6,100 new teachers were hired this year to fulfill the mandates for smaller class sizes. And perhaps voters will be willing to pay more to get the improvements in education that the voters felt the Legislature and Governor were not providing. So far the only outcry is coming from the politicians. I have yet to hear about a major business or consumer group complaint. Yet surely these groups know that the bill is coming due. Maybe things will change when businesses and households actually have to pay for smaller class sizes, and maybe not.

This is Hank Fishkind for 90.7 FM, WMFE News.

Fishkind and Associates, Inc.