

Fewer teachers in Broward lead to larger class sizes

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There are not enough textbooks to go around in Myrna Greenberg's ninth-grade reading class. She would like to use the electronic Smart Board hanging from her Plantation High School classroom, but it's not fitted with the proper plug-ins to make it run. She has 37 students in one class - 12 over the state-mandated limit.

"You wake up in the morning and tell yourself you want to do your job to the best of your ability. But how are you supposed to teach an English class without enough books?" said Greenberg, who has been a teacher for the past 10 years.

Greenberg's situation is emblematic of the challenges facing teachers and students throughout the Broward County School District, where another year of budget cuts and recent changes to the rules on class size limits (the now only apply to core classes, not electives or Advanced Placement courses) have resulted in more students in some classrooms with fewer resources. School administrators have had to redistribute students to account for the loss of 1,100 teachers the district could no longer afford to keep on its payroll.

A month into the school year, high school classes that were once capped at 25 students now hold up to 40. Some kindergarten through third-grade teachers, who once had 18 kids in a class, now have to merge with another class - two teachers with 30-40 students in one room.

While district officials have not finalized a tally of how many classrooms are over the limit, the Broward Teachers Union surveyed about 1,300 teachers. It reported instances of a high school reading class with 53 students, a high school science class with 48 and a middle school physical education class with 80 students.

"Accommodating the physical number isn't as big a problem as being able to reach all the extra students," said Richard Keen, a biology teacher at Cypress Bay High School in Weston. "It takes longer to get to know the students, longer to grade their assignments ... eventually something's got to give."

Keen, who has been a teacher for 40 years, has 36 students packed into a portable - 11 over the limit He spends up to \$100 a month out of his own pocket to purchase materials for the lab assignments his students perform in class.

He said he can hardly believe the outcome of the last legislative session, in which lawmakers stripped \$1.1 billion from the education budget, but passed a law banning students from wearing baggy pants to school - punishable by suspension.

“If one of my kids enters my classroom with baggy pants, I must stop and give them a warning,” Keen said. “But I’m suppose to look the other way when we violate the constitutional law of the state of Florida? What are you teaching students, that following some rules versus others is OK?”

Last year, Broward paid the state Department of Education \$2.9 million in penalties for not meeting class size requirements. The district was initially supposed to pay an additional \$74,000, but appealed to the State Board of Education for a reduction. Miami-Dade had to pay \$6.6 million and Palm Beach County \$16 million.

District officials say they cannot begin to determine the scope of a fine, until a final headcount is completed. But it could be more than last year, considering that even when the district used federal stimulus dollars to hire 1,400 teachers it still had 2,000 classes out of compliance. And most of those teachers were not rehired.

To ease some of the overflow in high school core classes, the district has encouraged students to enroll in online courses offered through the Florida Virtual School. And middle school students can also take courses online, too.

Many textbooks are also online, but some teachers are reluctant to rely on them for fear that some students don’t have Internet access at home.

In the brick-and-mortar classrooms, teachers say they worry about how larger classes will affect student participation.

“In classroom discussion, there is no way every single student can contribute in a 60-minute class,” said Angela Andriesse, an honors English teacher at Coral Glades High School in Coconut Creek.

And the workload can get unwieldy, too.

Andriesse staggers the due dates of each of her five classes’ assignments so that she can keep up with the papers turned in by her 150 students.

“Students need timely feedback on their assignments to know where they stand and to improve, but large class sizes make this difficult if not impossible,” Andriesse said.

Coral Glades biology teacher Jason Horner has had to scale back on the number of lab assignments for his class of 36 students. The 11 extra students make it more time consuming for students to navigate from one lab station to the next, so he has had to simplify experiments.

Instead of testing the effect of three or four substances on water quality, they now just test one, he said.

“Science is about trying to get as many kids as possible participating in a hands-on experiment, but with larger groups, you’re going to have some kids do the work, and a few more kids watching,” Horner said.

“You can try as hard as possible, but it’s still going to be a struggle to get every kid involved.”