

Smaller Class Sizes Come in Small Steps

*Reductions Start With
Young, Needy Students*

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An eight-year, \$139 million investment in class-size reduction in Montgomery County schools has not yielded substantially smaller classes across the board, according to a new report from a county oversight group. But the initiative has succeeded in providing the smallest classes to the youngest and neediest students, and making sure that classes for everyone else don't grow too large.

The class-size initiatives of Superintendent Jerry D. Weast, launched in fall 2000, reduced the size of the average classroom to 15 students in kindergarten and 17 in grades 1 and 2 at 62 schools serving disadvantaged students, at an annual cost of \$7.5 million. Additional funds have been spent to lower class-size maximums — not averages — in elementary schools across the county: from 28 to 26 in grades 1 and 2, and from 30 to 28 in grades 3 to 5. Weast has also reduced the size of special education classes, shrunk over-enrolled secondary classes and eliminated "combination" classes that serve students of multiple grades.

Public school districts across the

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For a Price, Smaller Class Sizes and Higher Test Scores

country have experimented with class-size reduction, a reform that addresses the top complaint of many parents and teachers. It is also among the most costly items of a school improvement agenda, and research consistently shows that it yields results only under the right conditions.

The report, published May 6 by the county Office of Legislative Oversight, proposes to help the County Council better understand the "trends and costs" associated with the effort in Montgomery.

The high costs are unquestionable: Class-size reduction adds \$28 million a year to the annual operating budget of the 137,000-student system. That's a significant sum at a time when the County Council is looking to cut \$20 million to \$30 million from the \$2.11 billion budget requested by the Board of Education for fiscal 2008-09.

The payoff isn't immediately clear. Average class size in elementary schools countywide has declined by just one student, from 22 to 21, since fall 2003, according to the report. Average class sizes in middle and high schools are 24 and 25, respectively, about the same as in 2003. Average kindergarten class size has increased from 17 to 18.

Nonetheless, the initiative has yielded results in academic achievement, a dividend that school officials noted, but that the oversight report does not examine. For example, the share of first-grade students in the county capable of reading a grade-appropriate text has risen from 62 to 82 percent in five years, according to a school system analysis. Roughly two-thirds of all students pass the reading test in the second grade, and minority performance has improved, although black and Latino students still trail whites and Asian Americans.

"We've dramatically changed class sizes in the early grades to close the gap by the second grade, and we are doing that," said Larry Bowers, chief operating officer of the school system.

Class-size reduction has proven popular with teachers and parents, who seem to be noticing the gradual decline in the number of oversized classes.

"I think definitely people could feel that in their classroom," said Jane de Winter, president of the county PTA. She noted a decrease in parent complaints about excessive class size. "I think there's a sense that there has been improvement in the last two years."

Much of the new funding has paid for support teachers and other educators not assigned to class-

rooms, who may work with students in small groups and collaborate with regular classroom teachers in ways that class-size data will not capture. Those teachers "meet our objective of providing intense, targeted support to our neediest students," Bowers wrote in a response to the report.

In the elementary grades, the impact of class-size reduction is most obvious when comparing the 62 disadvantaged "focus" schools to the rest of the county. Average class size in kindergarten to the second grade in those schools is 16, compared with 22 elsewhere in the

county, according to the report.

In secondary schools, the investment has focused on reducing the number of classes that serve more than the allowable maximum number of students: 23 in a middle school, 32 in a high school.

The oversight report notes a slight reduction in the share of secondary classes operating beyond class-size limits: About 5 percent of all classes are oversized, with the biggest logjam in middle and high school English classes. The report asks "what strategies have been undertaken" to reduce the size of those classes.

The problem with secondary class sizes, administrators say, is that principals must allow for a certain number of classes with small enrollment, such as specialized electives, that inflate class sizes elsewhere in the schedule.

"When only 12 students sign up for a course, the school cannot run it without having larger classes somewhere in their schedule," Bowers wrote.

In recent years, the school system has retained a reserve of teachers to dispatch to schools with oversized classes. This year, because of budget cuts, Bowers pre-

dicts the reserve will be depleted.

De Winter and others note reports that some schools are already losing staff members to budget cuts. Initial teacher allocations are made in March, and some principals and PTA leaders predict their schools will have larger classes in the fall.

"They were fairly stingy this spring with allocations," de Winter said.

Bowers and other top officials say teachers are allocated based on class-size formulas that have not changed since last year, and not on the budget.