

# Legislature to consider class size, replacing FCAT

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Measures to ease class-size amendment requirements, replace the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test with end of course examinations and require teachers in the state's pre-kindergarten program to hold a bachelor's degree are all up for consideration as the Legislature goes into session this spring.

Florida voters approved an amendment in 2002 to ensure smaller classes, the requirements of which have been gradually implemented over the last eight years. The final phase are scheduled to take effect next fall, when every class must meet a specific grade-level cap, rather than calculate a school or districtwide average.

The issue has split along political lines, with two Republican senators proposing an amendment that would keep counts at the school-wide average and permit the addition of a few extra seats where necessary.

Gov. Charlie Crist has expressed his support for the bill, saying Florida has successfully reduced class size by two students each year and that the state needs "a more reasonable approach that does not overburden taxpayers."

The state has spent about \$16 billion on class-size reductions so far, and Crist estimates the proposed changes would save \$350 million a year. Proponents of the bill say that if the class-size requirements go forward in its present format, districts may have to bus, rezone and, in the process, will disrupt student learning.

Democrats and the Florida Education Association, the state teachers union, meanwhile, argue the requirements have yielded positive results and should go forth as approved by voters.

"I think it's time the Legislature keep the promise to the voters and make sure we have a school system that is high quality, well funded and able to compete

in a global economy," FEA president Andy Ford said.

Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, and Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, will need a three-fifths vote in the Legislature for the bill to be placed on the November ballot. Voters would then need to approve it by a 60 percent majority. Previous attempts have succeeded in the House but failed in the Senate.

"If we don't act now to right size the class size amendment, massive rezoning, forced busing, ongoing chaos and unnecessary expense will play out in the communities across Florida," Gaetz said.

Teachers and school administrators have expressed concerns about the ramifications if it doesn't pass.

"I don't know one secondary school principal that is not fearing for their life right now," incoming principal Rocky Hann of Leon High School in Tallahassee said. She said a chorus teacher may have to teach science, and a band director may have to teach math. "My teachers haven't had a raise in three years. And my biggest job as a high school principal is their morale, where they don't walk up to school every morning, look like they just sucked a lemon for breakfast."

Among the other bills legislators have proposed so far:

- Revise graduate requirements to eliminate the FCAT and replace the standardized exam with subject area assessments in grades 3 through 5, and subject tests and end-of-course exams for students in grades 6 through 12. The bill was introduced by Democratic Rep. Dwight Bullard. Supporters say such a move would place greater emphasis on mastering content that will prepare them for college, rather than taking a cumulative test.

- "We're teaching how to take a test rather than absorb content and analyze," Rep. Bill Heller, the House Democrats'

ranking member on education policy.

- Require teachers in the state pre-kindergarten program to hold a bachelor's degree by July 2013. Democratic Rep. Janet Long has filed the bill for the third consecutive year.

The concept has been supported by business leaders, with the Florida Council of 100 recommending the state consider requiring post-secondary teaching credentials and provider accreditation in a recent report. And Crist's education spending proposal has called for a \$44.8 million increase in the program for 4-year-olds.

A 2008 report by the National Institute for Early Education Research concluded that while Florida is a national leader in providing pre-kindergarten classes, the program lags in quality and spending.

Studies have shown early education provides important economic and academic benefits.

- Expand private school vouchers. Rep. Will Weatherford has introduced a bill that would expand and provide more accountability to Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program. Education Commissioner Eric Smith has expressed his support of the bill, saying it will, "prove vital in helping low-income students secure learning opportunities that fit their needs."

Leaders have also discussed raising qualifications for the Bright Futures scholarship program, which provides college grants to top high school grads, and making teacher tenure more difficult to get.

Crist has proposed a \$2.7 billion spending increase in the next year's budget, including a modest increase for all levels of education. However, many consider the governor's proposal to be overly optimistic and doubt it will be passed in its current form. Stimulus money which has helped buoy public education will end next year.

