



# SCHOOL BOARD OF POLK COUNTY

P.O. BOX 391  
BARTOW, FLORIDA 33831

(863) 534-0500

1915 SOUTH FLORAL AVENUE  
BARTOW, FLORIDA 33830

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There is no doubt that the constitutional amendment to reduce class sizes, presented on the 2002 ballot, connected with Florida voters – at least 52% of them. Fundamentally speaking, who wouldn't want smaller class sizes for their child? A lower teacher-student ratio would reap nothing but positive outcomes. It was a grand idea.

It was a grand idea and taxpayers were willing to pay for it although, at the time, no one understood the potential cost of implementation. To date, over \$13 billion has been spent on the Class Size Amendment, thereby reducing class sizes in the state of Florida. And if the language remains the same, billions more will be spent to fully comply with the law as it is written.

Where the grand idea fizzles is when, for example, an elementary child or secondary student moves in after the school year has begun and causes an overage in the mandated size of a class. As the law currently stands, one student over the limit will require the principal to install a portable classroom or find classroom space elsewhere on campus, redo the current classes in that grade level or course, hire another qualified teacher, send that student to a school miles away, or offer a virtual class if it is available. None of these options come without a high price tag and disruption to students, parents and staff.

The current law simply does not allow for any flexibility.

According to the Amendment, Florida schools must comply with no more than 18 students per class in grades K-3, 22 students in grades 4-8 and 25 students in grades 9-12, by the fall of 2010. Currently, class size is calculated on a school-wide average and Polk meets this calculation. We've met the goal and intent of the law - class sizes have been reduced. Polk schools do not, however, meet the letter of the law calculated on a per-class basis. And Polk is not alone. Few, if any, school districts meet this requirement.

Help might just be around the corner. Senator Don Gaetz and Representative Will Weatherford are sponsoring an amendment to the Florida Constitution that will allow class size caps at a school average to meet unforeseen enrollment changes. It would require a 3/5 vote of the Legislature to put the constitutional amendment on the ballot in November. It would also require approval by 60% of voters to become law.

There appears to be a general understanding among legislators of the problems associated with the Class Size Amendment. Many of them are acutely aware that if action is not taken, challenges of rezoning, massive busing, disruption in student learning, double sessions and a shortage of qualified teachers will rest not only on the shoulders of the school districts, but also parents and students.

This is one of the most important issues facing our schools today, and I urge you to stay informed on this subject. There are not many times we get "do-overs" of this magnitude, but this might be one of them. Hopefully, Florida voters will get the chance in November to right size the Class Size Amendment.

Sincerely,

Gail F. McKinzie, Ph.D.  
Superintendent