

## Larger classes get closer to legal

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Bills redefine which courses apply to class-size rules

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The Tampa Tribune

School classes will get bigger under bills approved Thursday by the state Legislature.

Republican lawmakers said the measures will give school districts flexibility in implementing class-size limits set in a 2002 constitutional amendment, removing the limits from hundreds of subjects and allowing the districts to exceed them in some classes still included.

They maintained that strict adherence to the limits has disrupted learning and has cost districts much-needed money.

But Democrats in the House said the change will erode the quality of education and ignore the will of the voters who approved the amendment in 2002 and refused to roll it back last year.

"We should call this 'the Firing Teachers Clearance Act of 2011,'" said Rep. Scott Randolph, D-Orlando.

He argued that districts facing budget cuts could not get rid of teachers because of class-size limits, but this clears the way.

"If you vote for this bill, you are admitting that, yes, we are looking forward to firing teachers in this state," Randolph said.

The number of classes subjected to size limits would be cut by almost two-thirds with changes to the definition of the core curricula covered under the constitutional caps.

The legislation classifies as extracurricular -- and removes from class-size limits -- subjects from foreign language to marine biology and Florida history.

Specifically, the bills designate as extracurricular honors and advanced courses at secondary grade levels, courses without state assessments and courses not required for middle and high school graduation. However, the legislation would not change the classes covered in grades K-3.

Now, 849 classes are considered part of the core curriculum; the new definition would encompass 288.

Under the 2002 amendment, core classes are not to exceed 18 pupils for prekindergarten through third grade and 22 for fourth through eighth grade and 25 students for grades nine to 12.

The legislation also allows school districts to exceed those limits by up to three pupils in kindergarten through third grade and up to five students in grades four to 12 after their annual October student count.

The Senate version passed Thursday without debate, gaining approval on a 30-7 vote.

The House passed an amended version of the bill Thursday evening on a 79-39 vote.

During Senate debate on Wednesday, Minority Leader Nan Rich said that it will be a "disservice to our young people if we don't include foreign language as the core curricula."

Noting that most colleges require foreign language courses in their admission standards, Rich said, "It may not be required for graduation, but we live in a multicultural society."

Senate sponsor David Simmons, R-Altamonte Springs, who chairs the body's education appropriations subcommittee, said the current standards "include classical Hebrew, Creole Haitian, you name it, there are so many things that are included that are so far outside the definition of core curricula."

But Simmons suggested willingness to make adjustments on foreign language classes.

Rep. Erik Fresen, R-Miami, in Thursday's House debate said adherence to class-size restrictions is not helping education.

"We are doing a major disservice to the students in this state when we are coddling them," he said. Young people whose classes are limited to 25 are caught unprepared, he said, when they walk into university classes with 400 students.

Rep. Dwight Bullard, D-Cutler Bay, said he found colleges and universities around the state that have smaller class-size limits in relevant subjects than required in Florida's constitutional K-12 caps.

Bullard said Chipola College, where the House bill's sponsor teaches, does not allow more than 11 students in foreign language classes. Florida State University, he said, allows only 23 in freshman English classes.

Simmons has said he expects the class-size changes to save upward of \$70 million a year.

The measures come a year after legislators, saying districts were being forced to create new classes when enrollment is one student over, failed to persuade voters to revise the 2002 class-size provisions

Rep. Richard Steinberg, D-Miami Beach, said lawmakers were told last year the ballot measure was needed because problems with class size couldn't be fixed through legislation.

"How does this accomplish what we were told last year we couldn't do?" he asked.

"This isn't a fix," said bill sponsor, Rep. Marti Coley, R-Marianna, who chairs the chamber's education appropriations subcommittee. "We're not actually changing the requirement of the class size." The bill is "simply helping the districts having a way to implement that."

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