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**Larger classes coming soon
Elementary schools feel budget crunch
By ALEX FRIEDRICH**

Smaller elementary school classes, introduced in the 1990s as the next great education reform, may become increasingly uncommon in the coming years.

As school districts face ever-shrinking budgets, they're finding themselves forced to stuff more children into classes to keep teaching staffs low. Students in some kindergarten through third-grade classes, once capped at 20 students, may be bumping elbows with 28 or more kids in the coming years.

Such moves would erode a voluntary 1999 state reform program, called Class Size Reduction, that's popular with parents and faculty members. They're afraid larger classes would prevent students from getting the one-on-one attention they need, create discipline problems by crowding children, and stress out teachers by making them deal with more students.

But school business officials say small classes, despite their emotional benefits, have yet to translate into significantly higher test scores. That makes them a convenient budget target during tough times.

Though every district in the county has Class Size Reduction in at least one grade, this fall one district in six is "seriously considering reducing" the program by enlarging classes, said Mike Ottmar, associate superintendent at the county Office of Education. "If the fiscal situation doesn't improve for next year, I think more may have to take a look at it," he said.

When California started its ambitious program in 1996, it wowed the education world by pouring \$1 billion into it the first year alone. Since then, its annual payments have grown to \$1.5 billion, according to one university estimate.

The program was inspired by an experiment conducted in Tennessee from 1985 to 1990 known as the Tennessee Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio project. Its results suggested that K-3 students did better academically in smaller classes compared with those in larger. And it said the difference was greatest for low-income and minority students.

The idea made a good sell. Unlike many esoteric curriculum reforms, small classes are "something parents can understand," said professor Lawrence O. Picus of the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California. "I know when I go to school how many students are with my son."

The Parent-Teacher Association has given it the thumbs up nationally. And the county Office of Education's charter-school home study program has seen enrollment drop by

about 40 percent since the advent of Class Size Reduction.

The drop "says families were very pleased with what was going on in schools and didn't need an alternative," said Mary Kay Sgheiza, director of the program.

Teachers also found it refreshing. Those used to scrambling with 30 or 35 students suddenly found they had fewer names to keep up with.

"You try reports for 30 kids, as opposed to 20," said Cecilia Sanchez, a teacher at Salinas' Jesse G. Sanchez Elementary.

Smaller, more intimate classes allow instructors to get to know students better -- their strengths, their weaknesses, even their families. And because children had more room to work and move, teachers said, they were more prone to keep their mind on their work and out of their neighbor's business.

Some districts swear by it. Carmel Unified Superintendent Marvin Biasotti said his people hung on to the small-class program even when faced with a 40 percent budget cut.

"We'll give that up kicking and screaming," he said.

But putting together classes of 20 efficiently is difficult and more expensive than most people think. After all, as school officials are wont to say, "Students don't come in neat blocks of 20."

That's especially true when schools must make special accommodations for those such as Spanish-only speakers, gifted students and those with learning disabilities.

And putting together small classes means creating more classrooms and hiring more teachers. That's a tough job for growing districts already scrambling to build enough schools. Districts desperate for teachers for those small classes have sometimes been forced to hire less-qualified instructors, some analysts' reports have said.

To top it off, the state has slowly contributed less and less to the program. When the voluntary program started in 1996, the government paid for practically all of it.

Now it pays only about three-fourths of the expense -- about \$900 annually per pupil of the \$1,200 total cost, one school official said -- and districts say they're finding it harder to pay the rest.

Alisal Union in Salinas is one. Deputy Superintendent Barry Schimmel asked, "Where do we get that other \$300? From other places. We get it from the upper grades, from materials for all our children, out of maintenance -- so playgrounds don't get improved."

That has created some tension among teachers in higher grades, said Clifford Gilkey, a 5th-grade teacher at Loya Elementary. Administrators have to expand classes so the district can use the savings to keep lower-grade classes small.

"They're balancing a lot of Class Size Reduction on the back of the upper grades," he said.

School officials such as Schimmel would like to see the state raise the student limit from 20 students per class to 22. That alone would wipe out the \$1.6 million Alisal pays for the program and allow the district to keep it. But legislators fear financial pressure would continue to push that limit up over the years. So Schimmel said he's

now forced to dismantle Class Size Reduction altogether in kindergarten and third grade.

"I get angry when I think about this," he said.

Despite their support for the program, education experts such as USC's Picus said less expensive measures such as increased teacher training may work just as well as small classes.

Training itself is the key to taking full advantage of small classes anyway, experts say.

"Teachers can't just continue to do the same things they did with large classes," said Nancy Kotowski, associate superintendent at the county Office of Education. "They need to personalize the instruction and target students' particular learning styles."

For Sara Manglona, a first-grade teacher at Sanchez Elementary, it means working closely with children and monitoring their progress. In English, for example, she breaks her class into four groups of five. She takes one group for a half hour of guided reading while the others work independently.

With just five children in a group, she notices when a student makes an incorrect vowel sound when reading and can correct it right away.

But whether all teachers are able to exploit the benefits of small classes in California is unclear. A September 2002 report cited by WestEd and EdSource, two Bay Area nonprofit education research organizations, found the relationship between small classes and higher California test scores inconclusive.

"Student achievement has been increasing since the first administration of the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) in 1998," the report states, "but we could find only limited evidence linking these gains to Class Size Reduction."

The report suggests further study of the program as well as ways to improve it.

But test scores don't reflect reality, say teachers at Sanchez Elementary. The program hasn't gone on long enough to produce a fair testing, they say. And the benefits -- close relationships, better behavior and more student confidence -- don't come out in tests.

"We're the teachers," Manglona said. "We see the benefits every day."

Julieta Thoeni, the parent of a Sanchez kindergarten student, agrees. Enlarging classes, she said, is "going to be a big, big problem" for students.