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Student-to-teacher ratio may increase: Cash-strapped districts considering bigger class sizes

By Michael D. Hernandez / El Paso Times
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EL PASO -- Area schools could expand class size in the coming years as a way to deal with funding shortages, local administrators said.

Last year, all nine school districts in El Paso County complied with state standards that require 22 students or less to every teacher in kindergarten through the fourth grade, Texas Education Agency reports show.

The state does not have a limit on class size for grades 5-12.

But officials at area school districts say they are taking a look at how much money they can save if they slightly increase the ratio between teachers and students.

Some of those considerations are part of year-to-year planning for school district budgets.

In the Socorro Independent School District, Superintendent Xavier De La Torre said assessing staffing ratios helps identify where to re-direct resources.

"There is a fine line, a balance that you want to achieve," he said.

At the same time, De La Torre said that schools that have too low a ratio between teachers and students can be a drain on finances, given that about 88 percent of Socorro ISD's budget is spent on personnel.

Administrators of other school districts are analyzing class size because they are bracing for a grim financial future.

They say they have been struggling to pay for education since the state capped funding for public schools in 2006.

And as that funding has stayed level during the past four years, the state has mandated increased test scores and additional educational

programs, several administrators said.

Trustees of the El Paso Independent School District approved an application this week that asks the state for a waiver on maximum class size at Tippin Elementary School.

The request came as a result of too many fourth-graders at the school in West El Paso.

Some of those students are expected to begin attending Lundy Elementary when the new school opens. District officials expect Lundy Elementary to be complete in February.

The city's largest school district is hoping to win support of a tax increase during a May 8 election.

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election, the district would raise about \$36.8 million in revenue that will be spent on a variety of school programs including the fine arts, dual language, athletics and preparing students for college.

But if the district fails to win support it could consider expanding some class sizes to cope with a lean budget.

Kenneth Parker, the chief business officer for EPISD, said increased student-to-teacher ratios will

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likely be a trend across the state if school funding does not improve soon.

Parker said the district has an overall ratio of about 14 students to every teacher. The ratio includes special education classes and advanced classes, both of which typically have fewer students than regular classes.

Canutillo Independent School District officials have floated the idea of small increases of class size in some of its grades to help against a budget shortfall of about \$1 million.

The property-poor school district in West El Paso lost a November 2009 election when voters rejected its plans to generate revenue through a tax increase.

When averaging class size for all grades, Canutillo schools have a ratio of 14.7 students to every teacher, officials said.

Canutillo ISD interim Superintendent Roger Parks said the district is studying an increase in class size as part of several options to reduce its budget.

"We are a very, very labor-intensive industry," he said, adding that more than 80 percent of the district's money is spent on teachers.

Parks said administrators in Canutillo are mindful that too large an expansion in class size could jeopardize a teacher's effectiveness with students.


He believes that more and more districts will increase class size and that could prompt the state to re-think its student-to-teacher ratios.

Parks said he hopes that day never comes and class sizes across the state can stay small.

"There is research that shows that having too large a class affects student performance," he said.

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