

# **BTU** *Broward Teachers Union*

A Union of Education, Technical Support, Charter School and Education Support Professionals

## **MEDIA BRIEFING**

Florida legislature's gutting of state's class size limits impacts Broward schools  
***"Union Class Size Study reveals many classrooms bursting with students"***

**FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla., Sept. 21, 2011** – Following the Florida legislature's gutting of protections provided by the state's Class Size Reduction Amendment, a new study by the Broward Teachers Union reveals many Broward classrooms bursting with students.

BTU President Pat Santeramo said the union's study surveyed and examined the student enrollment in classrooms of 1,338 Broward teachers and found that the majority of the study's participants report their class sizes have increased this school year. During last year's legislative session, the Florida Legislature reduced the number of courses that fall under the protections of the state's Class Size Reduction Amendment from 848 to 288. The new legislation that now only caps class sizes for subjects tested by state exams or courses required for graduation reportedly leaves many Broward teachers scrambling to find desks and other materials for the influx of students.

"Florida voters went to the polls twice and supported reducing class sizes, but legislators 'thumbed their noses' at them," Santeramo said. "We already see the devastating impact of the legislature's gutting of the Class Size Amendment on Broward classrooms and students."

In 2002, Florida voters passed the state's Class Size Reduction Amendment by 52 percent. Statewide voters rejected the legislature's attempt to reduce the law's restrictions in 2010 when the legislators' measure failed to garner the 60 percent of votes needed to be placed on the ballot. Despite this, during last year's legislative session, legislators reduced by 66 percent the number of classes that fall under the protection of the Class Size Reduction Amendment.

Under the terms of the original Class Size Reduction Amendment, Florida Department of Education officials defined core courses as mathematics, language arts/reading, science, social studies, foreign language, English for Speakers of Other Languages, exceptional student education, and courses taught in traditional, self-contained elementary school classrooms. The original amendment's protections include the following:

- 18 students in prekindergarten through grade 3;
- 22 students in grades 4 through 8; and
- 25 students in grades 9 through 12.

The union's study found that 96 percent of the teachers surveyed believe low class sizes contribute to increasing student achievement. However, nearly all of the study's participants reported their class sizes exceed the original amendment's protections and 85 percent of the teachers who participated in the study report that their class sizes have increased during the 2011-2012 school year compared to the 2010-2011 school year.

Based on the self-reporting of teachers concerning their classes examined in the study, the union found the following minimum and maximum enrollment numbers and average enrollment numbers per academic level:

### **ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS**

Minimum Reported Student Enrollment per Class: 15 General Education

Maximum Reported Student Enrollment per Class: 48 Music

Average Reported Student Enrollment per Class: 23

### **MIDDLE SCHOOLS**

Minimum Reported Student Enrollment per Class: 21 Reading

Maximum Reported Student Enrollment per Class: 92 Band

Average Reported Student Enrollment per Class: 31

### **HIGH SCHOOLS**

Minimum Reported Student Enrollment per Class: 22 Mass Media

Maximum Reported Student Enrollment per Class: 78 Physical Education

Average Reported Student Enrollment per Class: 37

### **Study participants reported the following examples of over-enrolled classes:**

Elementary School Science Class: 38 students

Elementary Music Class: 48 students

Elementary General Education Classes: 34 students

Middle School Physical Education Class: 80 students

Middle School Band Class: 92 students

Middle School Drama Class: 73 students

High School Computer Class: 52 Students

High School Language Reading Class: 53

High School Science Class: 48 students

This school year's high class numbers became possible when the state legislature redefined the terms "core-curricula courses". Most parents of Broward students likely know nothing about the

changes and the impact that the weakening of the amendment is having on their students' classes.

The courses meeting the legislature's new definition and continued Class Size Reduction Amendment protection are specified by grade levels, subjects measured by state assessments, high school graduation requirements, and subgroups of students. They include:

- Language arts/reading, mathematics, social studies, and science courses in prekindergarten through grade 3;
- Courses in grades 4 through 8 in subjects that are measured by state assessment at any grade level and courses required for middle school promotion;
- Courses in grades 9 through 12 in subjects that are measured by state assessment at any grade level;
- Courses that are specifically identified by name in statute as required for high school graduation and that are not measured by state assessments, excluding any extracurricular courses;
- Exceptional student education courses; and
- English for Speakers of Other Languages courses.
- The term "extracurricular courses" is further redefined so that courses that may result in college credit would not meet the definition and fall within the amendment's protections.

Legislators also took their attack on the will of the electorate a step further by weakening even more the Class Size Reduction Amendment. Additionally, they also now allow school district officials the "flexibility" of determining that if assigning students to classes would be impractical, educationally unsound, or disruptive to student learning, the respective class sizes can temporarily exceed the amendment's maximums.

For administrator's grappling with the legislature's education funding cuts of \$139 million for Broward schools alone, which is \$542 per student, they are faced with reducing costs by increasing class sizes and eliminating teachers. As a cost savings, Broward schools eliminated about 1,400 teaching positions last year alone.

The additional number of students who can be assigned by administrators to a teacher even in classes still protected by the amendment are as follows:

- Prekindergarten through 3rd grade, up to three students above the maximum;
- 4th grade through 8th grade, up to five students above the maximum: and
- 9th grade through 12th grade, up to five students above the maximum

Broward schools' class size issue contains a great deal of irony and dichotomy. The district chooses to be fined millions of dollars for its failure to meet even the state's reduced class size requirements. And due to widely reported corruption in the district's school construction

program, thousands of classroom seats throughout the district remain empty while other classrooms in other parts of the school system do not have enough desks for students.

According to Department of Education records during the 2010-2011 school year, Broward schools received a state fine of \$2.9 million because the district failed to meet the requirements of the class size amendment. However, based on the district's own calculation that the average cost of a Broward teacher is \$60,000, the fine amount would only pay for the hiring of 48 teachers. This is far from the number of teachers needed to reduce class sizes to meet even the amendment's newly reduced requirements.

"The Class Size Amendment has become yet another sad example of unfunded mandates. It really adds 'salt to the wound' of Florida public schools being funded by the legislature at the bottom of all states in the nation," Santeramo said.

Broward schools face an especially challenging dichotomy. Due to corruption documented by the State of Florida Grand Jury issued on December 17, 2010, district officials spent \$130 million to over build classrooms that has resulted in 35,000 empty classroom seats. Unfortunately, many of the empty classrooms and student seats can only be found in areas not experiencing overcrowding or otherwise dispersed throughout the district. At the same time due to legislators cutting Broward's education budget again by \$139 million this school year alone, district officials do not have the funds to hire much needed teachers to adequately staff the empty classrooms and lower class sizes for students.

In an effort to lower class sizes, President Santeramo and other union leaders urge public school staff, parents and community members to lobby Congress to pass the American Jobs Act. The proposed legislation includes \$35 billion to prevent or reverse the layoffs of 280,000 teachers nationwide.

If the bill passes as proposed, this means Florida would receive \$1.7 billion dollars to save the jobs of 25,000 teachers statewide. Based on past federal stimulus dollar allocations, Broward schools would likely receive about \$165 million in order to properly staff its classrooms and offer a full and rich curriculum for students. This includes classes such as art, music, physical education as well as library media and guidance counseling services that have been cut and reduced due to budget cuts.

If the federal funds were used to save the jobs of teachers alone, it would prevent or reverse the layoffs of 2,756 Broward teachers, which would, for example have prevented the district's draconian non-renewals and layoffs of 1,400 teachers. This amount of federal funding would likely save jobs and reduce class sizes for several years. At the same time, portions of the money could likely be used to save the jobs staff who provide direct instructional support. Either way, passage of the jobs act would assist Broward schools in addressing its class size issue.

"If the American Jobs Act passes, it could help reverse the damage that the Florida legislature has inflicted on our state's public schools resulting in the over-crowding of classrooms. But ultimately, community members must call on the governor and legislators to adequately fund public schools at the state level instead of relying on the federal government for bailouts," Santeramo said.

Union members successfully lobbied Congress in 2010 for passage of the Education Jobs Fund, which brought \$555 million to Florida schools and saved about 9,200 teacher jobs statewide. Broward schools received \$54 million from the fund.

Officials used the federal money to temporarily prevent cuts to classes such as art, music, physical education, library media and guidance counseling services, which helped in lowering overall class sizes. District officials implemented many of these cuts for the 2011-2012 school year and it has contributed to increasing class sizes.

As more information becomes available about the new American Jobs Act, the union's leaders will once again organize public school staff to contact their Congressional representatives by telephone and email. Until the state of Florida starts to adequately fund public schools, relief from the federal government may be Broward schools only option to reduce class sizes.

"Even if union members are once again successful in lobbying Congress for funding to save education jobs and lower class sizes, taxpayers must be wary. Just like they did with Florida's lottery profits that were intended to fund education, the state legislature's favorite 'shell game' is to subtract money from the state's education budget and supplant it with dollars received from the federal government. Ultimately, our schools and students come up on the losing end of such games," Santeramo said.