

# DESERET Morning News

## Senator wants class reduction mandatory

*Schools that don't meet target would lose portion of \$\$*

By **Jennifer Toomer-Cook**

Deseret Morning News

Published: February 7, 2008

Is your kid's classroom jam-packed with students?

A Utah state senator wants to put pressure on school districts to make classes smaller.

Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, is proposing to require school districts to set a target for class sizes and meet it if they want to keep getting class-size-reduction money from the state. He pitched the idea Wednesday in a hearing of the education budget committee, which he chairs.

Essentially, the class-size-reduction program the state has funded for decades would become a grant program, built into the education budget bill if Stephenson has his way.

But a recent audit on the state's \$86.2 million investment in class-size reduction showed class sizes haven't gotten smaller over the years of investment because the state has not continued its investment in the program enough to outpace enrollment growth. In other words, class-size-reduction money from the state often is used to maintain status quo, even with school districts kicking in their own money to the cause, the audit found.

So then how can districts meet a target if they don't have more investment from the state, wonders Utah Education Association executive director Susan Kuziak. Because the money is used to hire additional teachers, losing the funds would probably lead to getting rid of teachers.

"I don't get how you do it with the same amount of money," she said. She wants to talk to Stephenson about his proposal, which is to add intent language to the schools' budget bill.

But Stephenson sees the message in the audit differently. It's time, he says, for school districts to pay up.

"The auditors assumed it's the state's responsibility to fund all class-size-reduction efforts. That was never the intent," he said. "We're looking at the idea of this ... being an incentive (for school districts) for meeting standards."

Without the money, schools may lose teachers while they are gaining students. For example, the Jordan Board of Education has trimmed class size by a half-student in several grades for the past four years, spokeswoman Melinda Colton said. It has cost nearly \$7 million to

reduce the class size by a full student in a single grade.

Meanwhile, the UEA has hopes pinned on a bill to give \$26 million more to class-size-reduction efforts.

HB194, sponsored by Rep. Karen Morgan, D-Cottonwood Heights, would have districts apply for grants to reduce class size to no more than 20 kids in kindergarten, 22 in first grade and 24 in second- and third-grade classes. Districts with the biggest classes would have priority. Most urban districts would qualify, and Jordan has the largest class sizes in the state, she said.

"Right now, that (state) money is just a maintenance of effort," Morgan said. The bill would pay for two-thirds of the \$39 million it would cost to bring all those elementary-grade class sizes to the target.

Morgan is a member of the appropriations subcommittee, and even though her proposal seems to conflict with chairman Stephenson's idea, she remains hopeful that subcommittee will prioritize it.

"I think the chances are really good that we'll get something," Morgan said.

---

*E-mail: [jtcook@desnews.com](mailto:jtcook@desnews.com)*

© 2008 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved