

North Carolina teachers are feeling the effects of state class size mandate

On Feb. 23, Scott Rhodes, the Chief Human Resources officer of Henderson County Public Schools stood in front of the school board and the community to explain the N.C. General Assembly's latest bill and how it was going to affect education in the county.

Currently, the state allots teachers for HCPS at a ratio of 1 teacher for every 18 students in kindergarten, 1-to-16 in first grade and 1-to-17 in both second and third grade. With these numbers, the county's average must be 1-to-21. The law says classrooms can have up to 24 students per one teacher as long as the class size average is 21. Rhodes explained that this system created flexibility within the school system to place teachers where they will be most effective, and provide for specials such as art, P.E. and music.

Next year, the maximum students allowed per classroom is changing per a Senate budget mandate. In the new law, the ratios change to 1-to-21, 1-to-19 and 1-to-20 for K-3 respectively. In order to meet the mandate, Rhodes said the county would need to hire 34 more teachers which would cost the county an additional \$1.8 million for salaries and benefits for teachers and an additional \$3 million to provide classroom space and supplies for the new teachers. Rhodes said the school system could request additional funds, but it is more likely the district will have to eliminate specials in elementary schools such as art or P.E., reduce the number of elective courses in middle and high schools, increase class sizes in grades four through 12, or find a combination of these options.

House Bill 13, a bill sponsored by Henderson County's representative Chuck McGrady, would increase the maximum individual class sizes to 1:24, 1:22 and 1:23, giving some of the flexibility back to school systems statewide. If the bill passed, Henderson County would only need 11 more teachers, rather than 34. The bill passed through the N.C. House of Representatives and school districts across the state are urging their state senators to pass the bill. However, the Senate is not planning to pass the bill at this time, saying it needs more time to gather information about school districts before making a decision. But school districts are already starting to feel the effects of not passing the bill.

Last year, legislators included a provision in the state budget that limited the class sizes in K-3 classrooms. However, instead of providing districts with direct appropriation to cover the cost of that reduction, the budget included spending flexibilities, making districts to reallocate funds they already had to pay for additional teachers instead of providing additional funding. Rhodes, HCPS's Chief Human Resource officer, said this mandate takes away the district's flexibility.

"When that flexibility is taken away, it creates an issue where we're going to have to add teachers, but they're not giving us more allotments," he said "I don't think they understand how we fund people and how we're trying to maximize every dollar that we have."

Districts across the state shared similar sentiments: they would face a number of problems trying to create new teaching positions with existing funds, and they needed a different solution.

Rep. Graig Meyer, a representative for Orange and Durham counties, said House Bill 13 was the proposed solution for the Senate's unfunded mandate. It was first introduced in the special session, and didn't initially receive support from many democrats. But this was not because of its content, but because of when it was voted on.

"I voted against every bill in the special session because the special session was called as a last-minute attempt to take Governor Cooper's power," Rep. Meyer said.

He said the bill was put in by sponsors as an attempt to get it through, but it wasn't successful because of its context.

Later, in full session, the bill was passed unanimously by the N.C. House. Rep. Meyer said he supported it as a compromise in order to provide more financial flexibility for educators statewide.

"I supported the bill," he said. "I think a class size cap without funding was a horrible mandate that was going to cause a lot of problems for school districts.

Jennifer Shelton, the principal at Fletcher Elementary in Henderson County, said she thought there would be a correction to the mandate because of the problems it would cause statewide.

"We don't have positions here to play with," she said. "We don't have wiggle room with what we've got."

Rhodes said he understands the thought process of the mandate, but he doesn't think they understand the impact, or the ripple effect, of implementing this law.

"They don't understand how we fund positions and how we're trying to maximize every dollar that we have," Rhodes said.

One ripple, he said, is that there is no class size cap on grades 4-12. Next year, the classroom average in fourth and fifth grade will be 30 students per teacher. And at middle and high schools, the number of teachers could be reduced which would increase class sizes and lower the class offerings for students.

"We're not just a K-3 school system, we're a K-12 school system. So, every one of those funding positions, those allotments we get from the state, we've got to make sure we have enough teachers to go everywhere," Rhodes said.

Shelton said it's important to look at the big picture and how other students are being effected. If smaller class sizes hurt students or took away specials, that's a problem. It also has a ripple effect on teachers.

"If we took away our art and P.E. positions, our teachers then wouldn't have a planning period during the say, and that's not fair to them either."

Many of the proposed solutions would create extra work and stress for teachers. Rhodes said there is an option to create combination classrooms if schools don't have enough space. This means that a classroom would be made up of students from different grades. For example, half from a class coming from third grade and half from second.

"Now, we've got a teacher who has to teach two different curriculums, second and third grade, because we don't have anywhere else to put [more classrooms]," Rhodes said.

He said this is not the best option for kids, but the state has put HCPS in a position where they have to make decisions they know are not in the best interests of students.

Shelton said you will never find an educator that says reduction in class sizes is a bad idea, however this mandate's effects on students is causing a problem.

"Reduction in class sizes is a good thing, but the positions have to be funded. It can't just be 'you have to do this' without additional help."

Shelton is fortunate, her school has the capacity needed to meet the state requirements, but other schools in the county aren't as lucky.

Hendersonville Elementary, another school in Henderson County, has to add four teachers according to school board projections, but there are no open classrooms. It's also too late to order mobile units, or to get them moved to their campus in time because the school would have to order permits, ensure it was handicap accessible and make sure the unit meets code. As a result, the school will have to repurpose rooms like the teacher's lounge to provide a space for E.C. and Title I teachers.

Despite the added stress on school districts, Rhodes said that it's important to remember all stakeholders are trying to do the right thing in these circumstances, but the legislature doesn't fully understand the decisions school systems are making and why.

"Henderson County Public Schools is using every dollar in the most appropriate way to maximize as many teachers as they can to provide for students in their school," Rhodes said. "We value the arts, the academics, every part of it, not just the core classes. We want kids to have a great experience when it comes to all of it."

Shelton said HB-13 would reduce the impact on her school system, but until the Senate votes on it, school systems will have to assume the bill will not pass. Schools budgets have to be made for next year.

“We have to operate on the on the current law, which says the lower class size,” Shelton said. Rep. Meyer said this bill would effectively place the entire burden of a student’s education on 1 teacher, leaving teachers across the state exhausted. This could also lead to less breadth of curriculum, and schools and parents statewide need to speak up and encourage the N.C. Senate to take action.

“School districts around the state and parents who are concerned about this need to speak out to their state senators and try and get them to come up with another solution if they’re not going to agree to this one,” Rep. Meyer said.