

October, 2002

Florida Council of 100 Opposes Smaller Class Size Amendment, by Steve Halverson

Education has always been the most important on the agenda of The Florida Council of 100. As business leaders from across the state, we are keenly aware of the complex issues that permeate our K-20 system, and understand the importance of establishing a high quality education system that ensures everyone – children and adults – will receive the best education that they deserve. Like the rest of the United States, Florida needs to improve its K-12 system to better prepare students for the workforce or college and adulthood. However, smaller class sizes across the board is not a factor that has been proven to improve student achievement. To embark on such a program without significantly solid evidence, at a cost of \$20-\$27 billion, is just bad policy. We want what is best for our children—this amendment is not what is best for our children. We oppose Amendment No. 9 for several reasons:

First, it is not clear how much benefit smaller class sizes would provide to our students, given specific conditions in Florida. There has been a lot of discussion of various studies about the benefits of Class Size Reduction (CSR) on student achievement. On a large scale, California, which serves 1.8 million students, was the first state to implement CSR statewide. Results from the CSR Research Consortium, which conducted a four-year comprehensive evaluation, concluded there is little connection between test score gains and participation in CSR. Other studies reach the same conclusion (e.g., Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, Indiana Department of Education). Only the Tennessee STAR Project, with a small sample size of 7,000 students, concluded that students in smaller classes had statistically significantly greater achievement. We thus agree that CSR can be effective in certain situations, since it seems to benefit minority and low-income students, and it can be beneficial for certain subject matters, grades, and teachers. However, Florida's CSR amendment reduces all classes for all students in all grades and in all subjects; it does not target specific situations where CSR is most effective. We do not believe the proposed amendment to reduce class size is the key to improving student achievement.

Second, the constitutional amendment is a huge expenditure, both absolutely and relative to the current budget, and there is uncertainty about the cost. The state will incur costs as the amendment is phased in, which estimated cumulative costs through 2010 range from \$20 billion to \$27.5 billion, depending on how classrooms are built. Furthermore, it is estimated that the amendment would not only require 30,000 more classrooms, but 31,000 more teachers as well between 2004 and 2010. That would be a gigantic drain on our resources, and will involve hiring many new teachers. With an already short supply of teachers in Florida, this will likely lead to the hiring of even more unprepared/uncredentialed teachers, as was the case in California's CSR initiative. We do not want to increase the

number of unqualified teachers in Florida's classrooms. Such a situation will only get worse, as evident in California, where the hiring of uncredentialed teachers in grades K-3 increased from 1.8 percent before CSR to 12.5 percent in the second year of the state's CSR initiative. Let us not make the same mistake in Florida.

Third, if we were to spend more money to improve Florida's education, it is not clear that smaller class size is the best investment of this money. We believe that teacher quality and school readiness should be the focus, not reducing class size. Research shows that teachers have a greater impact on student achievement than any other educational indicator. According to research from Tennessee (Sanders, 1996), the effectiveness of an individual classroom teacher has greater impact on student learning than other indicators of school quality, including school socioeconomic status, class size, and student variability within classrooms. Ineffective teachers actually decrease student performance. Florida recognizes the importance of teacher quality, as evident in the Florida Board of Education's Strategic Imperative #1: Increasing the supply of highly qualified K-12 instructors. Furthermore, ensuring that students come to school ready to learn is critical to their future educational success. Rather than spending our education dollars on reducing class size, efforts should be directed towards recruiting, hiring, and retaining high quality teachers, and providing programs to ensure young children come to school prepared to learn. We believe that is money well spent.

Fourth, we are concerned that if the proposed amendment is approved, it would result in the all-too-easy solution to classroom shortages—implementing double sessions. The state can not afford to build all of the classrooms required if class sizes are to be reduced. Could it also mean the end to art class, music class and physical education for our K-12 students? Such classes are a critical component of a child's overall education. We do not believe that double sessions and the elimination of art and music is the message we want to send to our students and parents who want a high quality education for their child.

Finally, a new Florida Board of Education has been established to view Florida's K-20 education system with a new set of specific strategic imperatives in order to improve Florida's K-20 educational effectiveness. These strategic imperatives have promise to yield student performance improvements at much lower cost than reduced class size. This effort should provide more information on what additional expenditures are most impactful and cost-effective, and we need to give the Board the chance to do their job.

We believe that reducing class size would improve the classroom noise level for the teacher and students, but the evidence provides no guarantee it would result in measurable academic achievement improvement as hoped for by its proponents. We oppose Amendment No. 9 and place our emphasis on ideas to improve teacher quality. As the U.S. Secretary of Education, Rod Paige said last Spring, "I'd rather have my child in a room of 40 students with a quality teacher, than in a room of 20 students with a mediocre teacher." Let's spend our money on initiatives we know will work!

Steve Halverson is Chairman of the Council Education Constitution Amendments Task Force, and President & CEO, The Haskell Company.