

Title: House Bill 94 introduced to cap the size of K-3 classes at 20 students

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House Bill 94, sponsored by House Majority Caucus Chair Raymundo Lara (D-Las Cruces), has been introduced to phase in a cap of 20 students per class in grades K-3.

The bill was drafted by the nonpartisan statewide think tank Think New Mexico, which recommended this reform in a 2022 policy report, "A Roadmap for Rethinking

Public Education in New Mexico," according to a news release.

Current state law caps kindergarten classes at 20 students and sets "average" class sizes of 22 for grades 1-3 and 24 for grades 4-6. Yet, when Think New Mexico examined statewide enrollment data from the Public Education Department, they found that 91 kindergarten

classrooms across the state were over the statutory limit in the 2023-24 school year, the release stated.

"We also found first grade classes as large as 26 and 27 students and class sizes as large as 28 and 29 students in second and third grade classrooms," a spokesperson said.

House Bill 94 would phase in the 20-student cap over

three years, allowing ample time for districts to plan for funding, space and staff.

Reducing class size for the youngest students will support New Mexico's ongoing

efforts to improve early literacy and ensure that students are reading by the end of third grade, a crucial determinant of a child's success in school and their lifelong earning potential, according to the release. When children are successful early in reading, it later leads to a boost in the state's economy and security, concerns for every

New Mexican.

House Bill 94 is based on research, cited in Think New Mexico's 2022 report, showing that smaller classes improve the learning environment for students in many ways. Smaller classes allow teachers to spend more time with each individual student, amplifying the benefits of the extended learning time enacted last year. Smaller classes also make it easier for teachers to build strong relationships with students and their families, which is the most effective strategy

for addressing chronic absenteeism.

Research also shows that achievement gaps lessen when low-income and minority students remain in small classes over several years. The 2018 Martinez-Yazzie court ruling, which found that at-risk students were not receiving an adequate education, held that the state must provide programs and services to prepare students for college and career, including smaller classes.

Limiting the size of elementary school classes to no more than 20 students is strongly supported by New Mexico voters, the release stated. A November 2023 poll found that 96 percent of New Mexico voters consider class size important to student success, and 83 percent of New Mexico voters support capping the size of K-6 classes at 20 students. The poll of 403 registered voters in New Mexico was commissioned by Think New Mexico and overseen by UNM Professor Gabriel Sanchez, a nationally recognized expert in New Mexico politics and policy.

"Our students deserve smaller classes where they are seen and heard and have ample opportunity to get the attention and support that they need," said Mandi Torrez, Think New Mexico's education reform director and 2020 New Mexico Teacher of the Year. "While opponents might claim that reducing class sizes can't be done because of our teacher shortage, this legislation is actually the best solution to that challenge. By improving the working and learning environment, we can keep many more of the great teachers that we have and also entice more teachers to join them — even teachers from other states."

More information is available on Think New Mexico's website, thinknewmexico.org.