

# All That Glitters

**Ontario's hard cap on class size is not necessarily good for students.**

**By Susan Kirwin**

Ontario's 20-student cap for primary classrooms has painful implications for the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) this September, with critics charging that schools must axe music classrooms, increase class sizes for older grades, and in one case, consider putting children into a basement classroom.

The Toronto board will this fall begin enforcing the cap in junior kindergarten and kindergarten classes, and also enforce an average of 20.5 students in Grades 1 to 3, with a hard cap of 24 students per class.

By September, 2007, 90% of classes from JK to Grade 3 will have 20 students or fewer.

The burden of the well-meaning initiative is falling on students and teachers in Grades 4 to 8. Music and other specialized classrooms may have to make way for additional primary classes.

"We have told schools they need to use classrooms for classrooms," said Peter Gooch, the TDSB's director of policy, strategic planning and accountability. "How frequent that will be is under analysis now."

Music classrooms could disappear at Thorncliffe Park Elementary School in East York, Thomas L. Wells Public School in Morningside Heights and Northlea Elementary and Middle School in East York, according to reports from the Toronto District Music Coalition, a parent group.

"The first thing to go is music," said Cynthia Dann-Beardsley, an executive member of the coalition. "The music teacher is up on the block every year."

Ms Dann-Beardsley said parents often find out too late to protest, and that school boards don't communicate enough.

"As soon as you don't tell people what you are doing it poisons the atmosphere," she said.

According to Annie Kidder, executive director of People for Education, Wilkinson Public School in Riverdale may create a classroom in its basement in 2007-08, which she said was "hardly tall enough for a grown-up to walk upright."

The Liberal government has added \$2-billion to education spending over the last two budgets, bringing the total expenditure to \$17-billion per year. About 2,000 new teachers have been hired to reduce class sizes, with some of the money going to a teacher-training program.

"I agree there are challenges in implementation," said Education Minister Sandra Pupatello. "But I'm happy to say those challenges are a result of the government's qualitative improvement."

"We need to get class sizes down. It's absolutely essential to have smaller class sizes in the early years," Ms. Pupatello added.

But Ms Kidder said the government is putting too much of a priority on enforcing the cap. "It's one of those things that's really easy to sell politically," Ms Kidder said. "Think about what you don't get [in order] to lower class sizes — if it means my kid isn't going to have a music teacher anymore or be in a big class later, is it worth the payoff?"

Though principals try to keep class sizes lower for Grades 4 to 6, Parents for Education said Grade 7 and 8 classes often have more than 30 students and that the averages are deceiving.

"A lot of Grade 5, 6, 7, 8 parents are worried about class size," said Ms Kidder, who has received phone calls about class sizes in the mid-30s.

Principals in the Toronto District School Board have previously had a fair amount of autonomy on class sizes, but Mr. Gooch said they now must follow strict guidelines to implement the province-wide cap.

The TDSB's average for Grades 4 to 8 in 2005-06 was 24.3 students, which is being increased to the provincial standard of 25 students per teacher.

Ms Pupatello said the cap cannot be looked at as a stand-alone policy initiative. It is being combined with a teacher-training initiative that focuses on individual attention termed "differentiated instruction," whereby teachers will use multiple teaching methods to accommodate students' different needs.

Ms Kidder said the primary cap is making only a marginal difference in primary class size, noting some studies say class sizes need to be at 17 or under to have a real effect.

Mr. Gooch said they may have to change attendance boundaries in the future or they may be able to solve the problem with portables and additions. He said the province has been recognizing the problems TDSB is facing.

"Part of making the cap work is making sure we have good classrooms," said Mr. Gooch.

*(Reprinted with permission from "Older Pupils Face Larger Class Sizes", in the National Post, May 2, 2006)*

## Toronto District School Board Enrolment and Budget

	Enrolment	Budget
2001-02	297,248	\$2,051,127,053
2002-03	290,861	\$2,136,983,656
2003-04	284,165	\$2,195,199,651
2004-05	279,037	\$2,389,207,000
2005-06	274,894	\$2,300,000,000*
		*approximate