

A lesson in subtraction

Moline school district loses teachers through funding cut

By Dustin Lemmon
Staff writer

The Moline school district lost three teachers this year because funding to reduce class sizes was cut back to cover just five teachers.

Local school officials said the state and federal grants allowed them to hire additional teachers to reduce class sizes, but when less money comes in, teachers are lost and class sizes grow again.

"There are just so many competing programs and so many needs," said Cheryl Allen, assistant superintendent of curriculum for Moline schools.

The teachers were hired on a temporary basis, Ms. Allen said, so when the funds didn't come through this year, they were let go.

She said there is no question smaller class sizes are good for students. "I think any teacher you talk to would say that it does affect the classroom in a positive way."

The East Moline grade school district hired four new teachers in the last three years with the class-size reduction grants, one for each of the district's four elementary schools, assistant superintendent of curriculum Doug Whisker said.

The grants pick up 95 percent of the salary, he said.

The grants are supposed to be used to reduce class sizes in first- through third-grade. If class sizes in those grades are below the state average, the money can be used to hire teachers in higher grades.

If the federal government decided to discontinue the grant program, teachers hired with the grant money could be lost, Mr. Whisker said. "We'd have to make a decision, and either the class size would have to increase or we'd have to use district money to bring those teachers back."

The district is trying to keep grade school classes to 20 or fewer students, and has done so in most classes, Mr. Whisker said. Teachers hired through the program can be shifted to different grades and schools to keep pace with fluctuating class sizes.

The grants have allowed the Rock Island school district to add eight teachers to its elementary schools, dropping class sizes anywhere from four to nine students, J. Jay Marino, assistant superintendent of curriculum, said.

Smaller class sizes allow teachers more time with students, with the goal of improving student achievement in reading, writing, math and science.

Teachers are able to "better meet the needs of the students," Mr. Marino said, adding that the district has been successful at keeping class sizes below the state average.

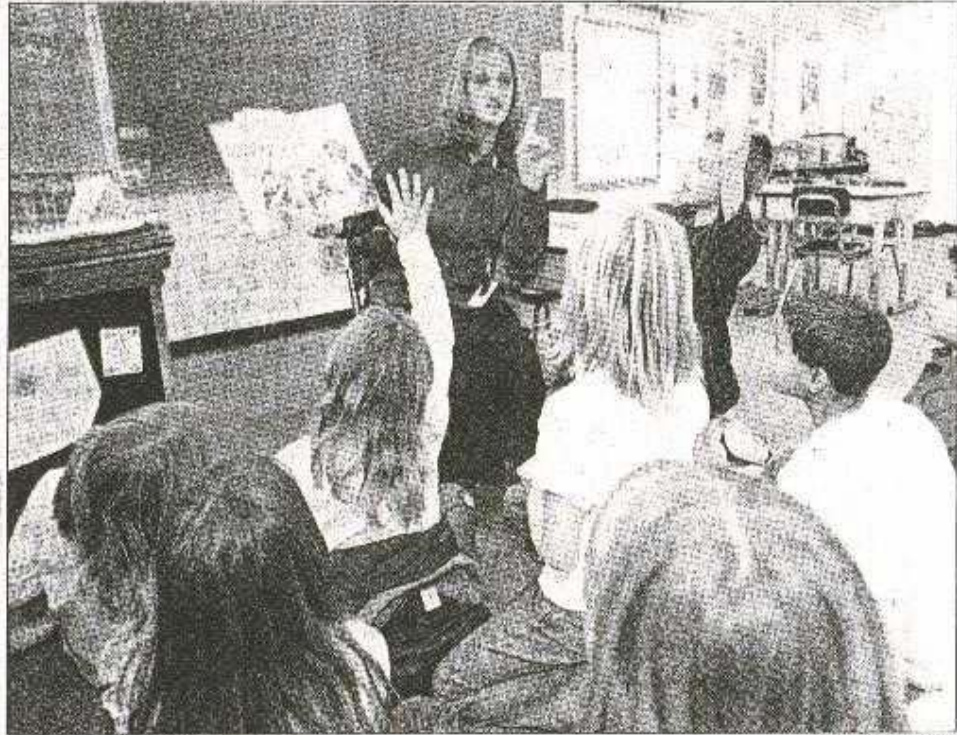
Last year, the district averaged 18.4 students in first grade, compared to 21.6 statewide. In third grade, they averaged 19.7 with 22.4 statewide, and in sixth-grade they averaged 20.9 with the state averaging 23.9.

Without the grant money "we'd definitely have to consider cutting back and not filling the positions," Mr. Marino said.

Riverdale superintendent David Bills said his district has hired one teacher through a class-size reduction grant in the last few years. That has allowed the district to keep its numbers in elementary classrooms in the high teens rather than mid-20s, he said.

The district could use more grant money to hire another teacher, but will be satisfied with what it gets, Mr. Bills said. "We would not have the teacher without the grant."

At George O. Barr Elementary School in Silvis, one



Todd Wenzel / staff

Beth McKinley, a third-grade teacher at Moline's Logan School, teaches a language exercise called 'rhyming round-up' with her class Thursday morning. Mrs. McKinley was hired as part of a class-size reduction grant from the State of Illinois. This year Moline lost grant money and had to scale back its class-size reduction teachers from 8 to 5.

teacher was hired thanks to a class-size reduction grant, said Rae Miller, curriculum coordinator and former principal, said.

She said the teacher has been moved through second-, third- and fourth-grades as class sizes increase. Without the grants, the district would have had some large classes, and had to use district money to hire a teacher, she said.

While many districts need funding to pay for more teachers, others are seeing declining enrollment.

Aledo superintendent Ira Cunningham said his district hasn't applied for the class-size reduction grants because they've lost 80 to 90 students in the last couple of years.

"We had small classes to begin with," he said. "We've gotten smaller classes on our own."

While the Cambridge school district also is below the state's recommended class size with less than 18 students per class in grades kindergarten through third-grade, it used grant money to hire a writing consultant

from Western Illinois University.

Superintendent Jim Berthold said the WIU professor will hold workshops for elementary teachers four or five times during the school year.

"We were able to use our class-size reduction money for other functions," Mr. Berthold said. "If they didn't (let the school do that) they'd almost be penalizing you for having small classrooms."