

Students learn hard lesson in school budgets

Funding shortfalls squeeze educators: 'There's just no hope right now'

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MSNBC

updated 11:18 a.m. ET, Tues., Aug. 12, 2008

Around Valentine's Day, parents in Cheatham County, Tenn., near Nashville, could face a problem: how to get their children to school.

There's enough money in the 2008-09 school budget to pay for bus fuel only until February. The Cheatham County Board of Education doesn't know what it will do after that.

"In the area where we live, those children are 12 miles from school," said Kim Lane of Ashland City, the mother of a high school-age son. "That's a long walk. What are they going to do?"

Lane could be asking the same question about school districts across the country. As 56 million children return to public schools in the coming days and weeks, they are getting a real-world lesson in economics.

In a survey of 546 local superintendents late last month by the American Association of School Administrators, 99 percent said rising costs and shrinking budgets were hurting their school systems.

Three in 10 superintendents said they were laying off or reassigning teachers to save money; even more, 33 percent, said they were eliminating or reassigning support staff, such as janitors and maintenance workers.

Nearly half — 44 percent — said their districts were cutting back on field trips, while 37 percent said they were cutting back on heating and air conditioning and 31 percent said they were buying fewer supplies.

"While school systems are working hard to limit programming cuts, the sharp increase in costs will have a negative impact on children, especially disadvantaged children, unless the states and federal government act quickly to provide relief," said Randall Collins, the association's president.

Jobless teachers, crumbling schools

Late last month, the Miami-Dade County school board tentatively approved budget cuts of \$700 million for the new school year. More than 1,500 teachers will lose their jobs, and none of the rest will get raises.

In the rural Maccray school district in southwestern Minnesota, students will stay home on Mondays. The district is moving to a four-day week to save \$85,000 in costs for buses, heating bills, substitute teachers and student lunches. Districts in at least 11 other states are doing the same.

"We wouldn't do the four-day school week if we had money," Superintendent Greg Schmidt said. "With the state budget the way it is, there's just no hope right now."

Meanwhile, in Indianapolis, students at Floro Torrence School 83 will put up for at least another year with a crumbling entryway, an antiquated fire alarm system and restrooms that aren't accessible for the handicapped. Edgar H. Evans Magnet School 11 won't replace tiled floors or the concrete crumbling beneath them. Pieces of brick will keep falling from Stuart Hall at Tech High School.

That's because the Indianapolis Public Schools system has a to-do list that's about \$10 million long, but it has only about \$3 million for maintenance and repairs.

'It's very hard and very emotional'

In many school districts, crimped state budgets also are forcing spending cuts.

"The mortgage crisis going on means there are fewer property owners, fewer property taxes being paid," said Bill Siegerferth, president of the Akron (Ohio) Education Association.

To save money, Virginia officials decided to merge the state's two schools for students with disabilities. As a

result, parents of students at the Virginia School for the Deaf, Blind and Multi-Disabled in Hampton will have to decide whether to send their children hours away to the state's only other facility, in Staunton.

In Traverse City, Mich., Michael Murray, superintendent of the Suttons Bay School District, said he expected to fall at least \$1 million short this year thanks to cuts in state and federal funding.

The district has to find its own money to make up the shortfall, which represents 13.5 percent of its projected expenses. Class sizes will grow, and the athletic program will be cut so sharply that freshman sports teams could be eliminated, meaning ninth-graders would play on junior varsity teams.

Twenty-one teaching and staff positions are also on the chopping block.

"We've had layoffs before, but never this many all at one time," said Keven Cross, president of the Suttons Bay Education Association. "It's hard and very emotional."

Food, fuel add up to crushing burden

School districts are also getting hammered by higher prices for food. The School Nutrition Association projects that it will cost \$1.5 billion more to feed the nation's schoolchildren this school year.

"Milk, cheese, bread, grains, they're all going up," said Sandy Matelski, food service director for the Gaylord Community Schools in Otsego County, Mich.

Fuel costs are a special burden, because districts have little flexibility to make a difference short of cutting bus routes. The targets become field trips and buses that take sports teams on the road.

Trustees of the Brazosport Independent School District in Freeport, Texas, south of Houston, voted last month to drop all field trips that aren't required by a course's curriculum or by the University Interscholastic League, which oversees athletic, music and academic contests in Texas schools.

Aquatic science students, for example, can still visit a beach to collect samples, but trips to Houston's museums are too pricey, as they require a 100-mile round trip for five or six buses at a time. District officials said the new policy would save them at least \$80,000, a small but real step toward addressing the district's \$3 million budget shortfall.

"It's no different than what our own families are doing," Superintendent Joe Ripple said. "We're trying to decide how to enjoy ourselves the most for the least amount of dollars spent on fuel."

In Mississippi, the state High School Activities Association cut sports teams' schedules by 10 percent, except for football. To reduce the number of bus trips taking teams to competing schools, varsity basketball, softball and baseball players will turn out for three fewer games a season.

Administrators in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where sprawling distances mean sports teams can travel hours-long round trips to play games, are looking for other ways to keep their athletes nearby. They're discussing realigning conferences, which could end decades-old rivalries.

Down to the bone marrow

At a time when strapped parents most need the services of schools to help raise their children, the outlook is bleak, said James Notter, superintendent of the Broward County schools in South Florida.

In hard-fought budget negotiations, "we worked hard for roughly a year and a half so we could meet the challenges of an economic downturn," Notter said.

The district dropped optional summer school classes and extra instruction for slow learners. It consolidated bus routes and streamlined the administration. It bought less expensive food for students. It froze hiring, leaving about 300 positions unfilled.

And the school board still had to slash \$61 million from the budget for new academic year. That's on top of \$40 million it cut last year.

"We are truly at the bone marrow," Notter said.