

School districts may up taxes

State superintendent says he fears some may not be able to make payroll

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Some public school districts may have to raise taxes next year to make up for \$85 million in funding cuts, state education officials said Thursday.

State Superintendent of Education Hank Bounds said Thursday he is afraid "some districts will be at a point where they can't make payroll."

That could happen before the end of this school year. "It's not up to the local homeowner to keep digging in his pockets every year to support the local school district," State Board of Education Chairman Bill Jones said. The money "should come from the state of Mississippi."

Gov. Haley Barbour announced Wednesday that an additional \$158 million has been cut from the state's billion-dollar budget, including an \$85 million cut to elementary and secondary schools. Declining revenues in a weak economy have caused the second rounds of cuts in the fiscal year that ends June 30. In November, the governor trimmed agency budgets \$42 million, or 2 percent.

State law requires the governor to trim spending when revenue falls below estimates for the fiscal year.

The Mississippi Adequate Education Program was cut 3.49 percent. Other budgets directly affecting schools were cut by 5 percent, including National Board Certification, building and buses funds and teacher supplies.

More than 20 school districts won't have enough money to cover the funding cuts. Even more school districts will have cash-flow troubles after hacking their budgets.

"It is absolute nonsense," Jones said about not fully funding MAEP. He added that not funding the program is "akin to a sin. At this point, it's a huge step backward."

Jones also raised questions about why state officials refuse to use the rainy-day fund, leaving schools no other options but to dip into district reserves, if available.

"If it's not important enough to fully fund education, I don't know what it's for," he said about the state's rainy-day fund. "That money belongs to taxpayers."

The decision not to use rainy-day funds is hypocritical and punishes school districts that "do everything in their power to operate effectively," he said.

"Sure times are tough, but the money's there to do it this year, and the sky is not falling."

Barbour has said he wants to use reserves conservatively with economic conditions expecting to worsen before improving.

Under state law, school districts can't operate in the red. But they also can't sever employee contracts in the middle of the school year or have mid-year tax increases. They still need to keep the lights on,

feed students and pay teachers, Bounds said. Teacher salaries make up about 75 percent of school budgets, Bounds said.

Bounds has not yet decided how the state Department of Education will divvy up the budget cuts among the state's 152 school districts. A date has not been set for when he will meet with school superintendents.

In the meantime, school districts are looking for ways to further stretch their budgets.

"We will have to do everything possible to protect the integrity of the classroom," Superintendent Lonnie Edwards Sr. said in a statement. "We will work to make sure that the cuts and refinements are far away from the classroom."

Last fall, Rankin County schools reduced expenditures for the current school year by 5 percent, following a recommendation from Bounds, district spokeswoman Marisa Martin said in an e-mail. The district has frozen new positions and nonessential open positions. Each Rankin school's budget was cut by 5 percent, or \$3.50 per student, and the maintenance account was trimmed to \$3.50 per student, she said.

There will be no out-of-state travel to conferences for Rankin County schools employees, and other trips out of state must be approved by a superintendent. The district is also continuing an effort to reduce electricity costs by turning off computers and monitoring heating and cooling systems, Martin said.

When budget cuts were made in the fall, Madison County schools Superintendent Mike Kent said he vowed, "We'll hitch up our britches and we won't say a word."

Now, "I'm not quite as cheerful as I was the first time around," he said. "But ... our financial director does a good job and she has put us in a position to weather the storm."

The district has enough money in its general fund to cover payroll and other expenses, as well as providing furniture and teachers for the two schools that will open this fall.

Hinds County schools will not automatically fill vacancies this school year. Instead, district officials will evaluate any open position on a case-by-case basis, spokesman James Mason said. Nonessential district travel has been frozen, he said. Field trips requiring fees for students have been cut, too.

"Reserves will provide us with a cushion right now," Mason said. "It just depends on how deep the cuts go."

Additional Facts

At a glance

January budget cuts that will directly affect Mississippi's public elementary and secondary schools include:

- Mississippi Adequate Education Program: \$76,627,825
- Vocational and technical education: \$4,939,389
- Mississippi Department of Education: \$2,149,126

- School millage reduction (ad valorem taxes): \$1,380,000
 - National board certification: \$1,027,309
 - Schools for the blind and deaf: \$603,310
 - Buildings, buses, utilities and debt service: \$480,000
 - Supplies and instructional materials: \$210,000
 - General education: \$21,613
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