

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT DISTRICT BUDGET REDUCTIONS

We have received many questions regarding the District's budget reduction plans. This question and answer format is intended to provide access to the same information for all interested parents, staff and community members.

Background: In response to the state's current budget deficit, the Washington State Legislature reduced Bellevue School District's funding by more than \$5.5 million for the coming school year. This will require the district to make significant cuts. These cuts follow the District's own budget reductions of \$4.8 million made for 2008-09. This 2008-09 reduction was made in order to begin a three-year plan to restore the district's Reserve Fund (a rainy day fund for emergencies) which had fallen below the recommended five percent of the total district budget. This fund is needed to be able to meet unanticipated cost increases in areas such as supplies and materials, energy, utilities, and medical benefits or any further drop in revenue because of lower enrollment than projected or further state reductions. In addition to reductions in response to the \$5.5 million state revenue loss for next year, reductions are necessary to meet the obligations of the contract settlement after last fall's teachers' strike. Since 83% of our budget is dedicated to salaries and benefits, the current and future reductions involve eliminating staff positions.

Have you looked at everything to cut before you begin to reduce teaching staff?

As noted above, this is not the first time that the District has been through a budget reduction process. Five years ago we worked with a 60-person citizens committee, which spent six months looking at every aspect of our budget before helping us make the reduction decisions then. At that time, the goal was to identify reductions that would allow us to continue to support priorities like the seven-period day for students, smaller class sizes, and supplemental pay and health benefits for our employees that are not funded by the state. As a result of that community process, the persons or programs that seemed of lesser priority have already been cut. We have cut books and materials, school budgets, aides, office staff, custodians, bus routes, administrators, travel and more. A good percentage of district costs are fixed. These include insurance, energy, contractual obligations, and state-mandated programs. In the reductions last spring, we made a 6% reduction (8 positions) in central administration and only a 2.9% reduction (32 positions) in teachers and other certificated staff in the schools.

For 2009-10, the 60 FTE reductions in teachers and other school certificated staff will represent a 5.7% reduction and two additional administrators will be another 1.8% reduction. Since the primary state reduction was in funds provided through I-728 – the class size reduction initiative - it seems appropriate that the reduction be made in certificated instructional staff.

Why don't you just cut more administrators? How does the number of Bellevue administrators compare to other districts?

When we compared our certificated administrative staffing to other districts in the area before last year's reduction of administrators, according to Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction data, Bellevue was about one administrator below the average on a per student basis. Central office administrators supervise and manage student services such as counseling, gifted education, interdistrict transfer and open enrollment, handle all legal affairs, manage the total district budget, make sure payroll is met, hire and fire employees, manage all capital construction and school maintenance,

supervise custodians, bus drivers, crafts workers, special education teachers, and all ESL teachers. In addition they provide support and supervision of our schools. These duties are critical and necessary with 28 buildings, 17,000 students and more than 2100 part- or full-time employees. These areas have already been slashed through earlier reductions. While these areas may seem “lesser in importance than classrooms,” they are the infrastructure needed in order for us function as an organization and support teachers, students and schools.

What will be the impact of a reduction of 60 certificated FTE (teachers and non-classroom school certificated staff such as counselors, nurses, and librarians)?

When we make reductions in teaching, staff class sizes will increase because we have fewer teachers teaching the same number of students. Next school year, the class size increase at the elementary level will be an average of 1.6 students on top of the .8 increase this year. At middle and high school, the increase is will be an average of 1.4 students on top of a 1.0 increase this year. Principals have made every effort to make some of their reductions in non-classroom positions to lessen the impact on actual class sizes. In allocating classroom staff to elementary schools, the district has tried to provide additional assistance to highly impacted Title I schools.

Does the District have a written policy on a maximum class size?

No. Decisions about the appropriateness of any individual class size are not about numbers alone. Other factors such as the age and grade level of the students, the academic achievement level of the students in a school, the secondary subject matter, the need to mainstream special education students from a centered program, and the number of ESL students are also considerations as we monitor class sizes. At the secondary level, not all classes are impacted equally by the same number of students. Some PE classes can in fact be larger than other core classes. As actual fall enrollments become more firm we are prepared to provide additional support in specific enrollment situations of concern.

There is a large curriculum department. Couldn't we reduce part of that entire department instead of reducing teachers?

The curriculum developers and curriculum/tech coaches are funded out of the Capital Projects Fund. The capital projects fund includes bond money, which can only support the construction of our new and remodeled schools, and the capital projects technology levy. These latter funds support the purchase of computers, interactive whiteboards (called Smart Boards) and the development of technology systems of the District such as the curriculum web to ensure equal access to a common curriculum and assessments for all students regardless of the school they attend. The money from that fund can support people who are directly tied to training in and development of those technology systems such as our developers and coaches. However, we cannot fund classroom teachers, librarians or counselors from the Capital Projects Fund as these are responsibilities of the General Fund of a District.

Are you eliminating librarians?

We will still have librarians in our elementary schools. The decision to eliminate middle and high school librarians was a difficult one made for the same reasons as the reduction of high school counselors in 3 of our 4 comprehensive high schools. At middle and high schools, each individual school received a reduced staffing allocation for 2009-10 in addition to the one experienced for this current year. The

staffing allocation to secondary schools is intended to include the classroom teachers, counselors and librarians at a school. When state revenue reductions made it necessary to reduce 60 full-time-equivalent teaching positions district-wide for 2009-10, each secondary school made an effort to put as much of its allocation into the classrooms as possible in order to keep class sizes down. The use of a school's staffing allocation is a decision and responsibility of each building principal. Each middle and high school independently eliminated the certificated library staffing. Libraries will be open, staffed by library assistants, and accessible to students and staff. The current librarians will be placed in teaching positions. Information literacy will continue to be taught in elementary school and supported by regular classroom teachers in secondary schools. One secondary school chose more than 10 years ago to eliminate the librarian to preserve class sizes. And, while no one considers this ideal, this a decision made by schools to do their best to maintain course offerings and reasonable class sizes.

This difficult decision was not made lightly by our principals. We are hopeful that in years to come, funding will improve and principals will be able to make different decisions about how best to use their allocations.

Some private organizations are avoiding layoffs by asking employees to take a cut in pay. Why don't you do that?

We are legally bound by contracts with ten different employee groups, including teachers. Teachers' salaries have already been reduced as a result of the state's eliminating one paid day in August and they are being denied any state cost-of-living pay raise as well.

Aren't there any other options for reducing costs without raising class sizes?

In making reductions for next year, one goal was to cause the least pain to staff and, therefore, the least disruption for students; the other was to preserve elective programs. Bellevue offers middle and high school students seven classes a day, while the state pays for five. This means that our teaching staff is about 28% larger than the state funds. ***This is why our "teacher" budget is higher and where we have chosen to spend the extra money when we have it.*** By eliminating the seventh period and the additional teachers we support to provide that extra period, we could maintain class sizes, but would significantly reduce students' choices. The elective program is highly valued by families and programs would be decimated if those teachers were eliminated. We have hoped to retain the student capacity to continue taking all four core class subjects, plus electives such as art, music, foreign language, and career-tech programs. If we need to continue to reduce we will be forced to seriously consider elective reductions.

Why not use your fund balance to cover the loss of state funding?

For the district not to continue its movement toward establishing a Fund Balance that is equal to five percent (5%) of its annual expenditures would be irresponsible. There are often unanticipated expenditures in districts where our budgets are based on predictions: there can be added costs for unfunded teachers when enrollments came in under projection, utilities costs during severe winters, increased health care premium costs, and bus fuel costs.

If we weren't able to pay our bills, the state would be required to step in. An adequate fund balance also has allowed us to maintain the highest fiscal rating in the state which helps us secure bonds at the best rates possible. Several districts surrounding us have found themselves in financial crisis by not

adhering to this recommended reserve and have taken years to recover and very difficult budget cuts. We did extend, by one year, the recovery of the fund balance which saved a few programs and personnel.

Why don't you ask parents to pay for transportation?

The law does not permit us to ask parents to support transportation costs with the exception of costs to transport students to optional programs such as Spanish Immersion. Our experience even with Spanish Immersion transportation is that there is a cost involved in collecting, monitoring and enforcing that fee. It would not be prudent for us to make staffing commitments based on transportation fees – even if they were allowed.

Are other districts making similar cuts?

If you have followed the news, every district is in the same position. All are making difficult cuts. Education has been traditionally underfunded and we have strived to work with that disadvantage. That makes these budget cuts even more difficult as every cut we have made impacts people we value and programs that are needed.

Are these permanent cuts?

We sincerely hope not. The state budget is in crisis so we are all impacted by the legislative budget reductions. We hope that the economy will turn around and that the reductions we make are temporary. We are losing valuable people and we hope that, in the near future, we will be able to restore needed jobs and employees. In the meantime we will work hard to try to mitigate strong impacts on students.

Can we raise private money?

Yes, of course. The community and public can raise private money for the district. Our Bellevue Schools Foundation and individual school PTSA's do that every year and place it into needed programs and support for Bellevue students. If you are financially able, we would encourage you to look into these options.