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MPS budget would eliminate 260 teaching positions

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The ominous predictions of staff cuts that have circulated for months in Milwaukee Public Schools came true Thursday when the district proposed eliminating 682 jobs next year in its 2010-'11 school year budget.

The [proposed \\$1.3 billion budget](#) details a grim financial situation next year in which personnel will be eliminated at all levels, from painters and IT workers to aides and assistant principals and teachers. Outside MPS, suburban districts have been able to trim budgets mostly through program cuts, but some might have to cut teachers as well.

The MPS budget calls for eliminating 260 teacher positions, a 4.5% reduction in the teaching staff that, if approved, would be the first time the district has laid off an educator for budgetary purposes since the 1980s.

Superintendent William Andrekopoulos said the number of employees affected by potential layoffs could be "into the triple digits."

Generally, staffing reductions each year mirror the projected reductions in the number of students in the district. MPS expects enrollment to decline 2.1% next year, but staff cuts will be three times that much, or 6.4% of the workforce.

The financial crisis in MPS is largely the result of the increasing cost of benefits for employees, especially for health insurance. Next year, the district estimates that it will pay 74.2 cents in benefits for every dollar it pays its employees in salary.

"If the rate remained at 68.7%, the already extraordinarily high FY10 rate, MPS would spend about \$28 million less on fringe benefits in FY11 than is now budgeted," according to Andrekopoulos' overview of the budget.

"That is money that could be used to staff classrooms with more teachers, with more supplies and support," he said. "That money, as is now budgeted, is opportunity lost."

But Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association President Mike Langyel does not think layoffs are a long-term solution.

He said Thursday that if the union accepted "subpar salaries and benefits," it would not be able to attract and retain the kind of highly skilled teaching workforce that the city needs.

"We view cutting resources as a race to the bottom," Langyel said. Instead, he said, the union and the district should work together to lobby Madison for a more adequate funding stream for schools.

Michael Bonds, Milwaukee School Board president, said that if the MTEA would agree to changes in the health care plans - the two sides are in contract negotiations - it could ease the severity of the projected staff cuts. At the moment, teachers can choose from two health care plans, but there's no financial incentive to take the lower-cost plan.

"There are avoidable layoffs with concessions on health care," Bonds said.

There is some good news: Some schools that received extra funding to host a class-size reduction program in the lower elementary school grades can keep their programs. [This school year](#), Andrekopoulos said the district could no longer support the SAGE program at 11 elementary schools, which keeps class sizes small for kids in kindergarten through third grade.

Now, because the city did not require the district to put \$7.5 million into a pension fund, that money has been brought back to support SAGE in the schools originally targeted, except for Burdick, Cooper and 95th St. elementary schools, Andrekopoulos said.

He added that most of the new programs in the budget have been put together by re-allocating money from other areas, or through the use of stimulus funding, which will run out after next year.

Budget highlights

Some elements of the proposed budget include:

- \$6 million for a districtwide preschool to eighth-grade reading curriculum.
- A \$1.2 million proposal to expand early childhood programming to 120 children in six more school sites.
- \$2 million for an initiative to better prepare ninth-graders through a summer orientation and other academic supports.
- \$2.8 million to support a special fund for art, music, physical education and career and technical education in schools.
- \$2.7 million in stimulus funding targeted at increasing parental involvement in 35 elementary schools.
- \$9.8 million in bond proceeds to establish a central food production facility in MPS that can produce up to 40,000 pre-packaged school meals a day.

Seven MPS schools will close next year, and two will merge. Those closings and others over the past four years have saved the district about \$7.1 million, which will be redistributed to other schools. There are about 198 schools in MPS.

Outside of MPS, most districts have kept cuts to their teaching force to a minimum. Most have trimmed budgets through cutbacks in programming, not personnel.

For those anticipating cuts to teaching positions, districts won't know how many of those reductions will lead to layoffs until they know the number of retirements and what the contract settlements entail. In MPS, preliminary layoff notices won't go out until at least mid-May.

But the Elmbrook School District, which gave preliminary layoff notices to 41 teachers this year, might reduce its teaching force by the full-time equivalent of 16 to 22 teachers. Twelve of those reductions are the result of enrollment losses, and the rest are due to budget concerns, said Melinda Mueller, Elmbrook's communications manager. And not all of those reductions will lead to layoffs, she said.

In the West Bend School District, which reached a tentative agreement on a contract with its teachers, Superintendent Patricia Herdrich said the deal could save the full-time equivalent of 7.4 of 27 teaching jobs that had been under consideration for elimination in 2010-'11.

But those districts that get through next year relatively unscathed face a tougher time the next year, when the state no longer receives federal stimulus dollars to subsidize its aid to schools. Mary Bell, president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, said the state could lose as many as 3,900 teaching and teacher support staff positions in 2011-'12 without more federal aid.

Teachers unions are supporting an effort by some U.S. Senate Democrats and the U.S. secretary of education that would provide more stimulus aid just for public schools.

"We know that the economy is coming back, but it's not coming back that quickly," Bell said.

Amy Hetzner of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.

MPS budget hearings

Public hearings on the budget will be at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday and at 7:30 p.m. May 11, in the auditorium of the Milwaukee Public Schools central services building, 5225 W. Vliet St.

Proposed budget eliminates

- **260 teacher positions**, down 4.5%
- **87 general education assistants**, down 32.7%
- **95 paraprofessionals**, down 10%
- **22 assistant principals**, down 16.7%

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