

# AlaskaDispatch

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[Home](#) > Anchorage School District plans to cut 219 positions, including 159 teachers, to balance budget

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## **Main Image:**

[Anchorage School District budget Ed Graff](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

## **Main Image Credit:**

Jerzy Shedlock photo

## **Main Image Caption:**

Anchorage School District Superintendent Ed Graff presents the 2014-2015 school budget Jan. 21, 2014 at the district's administrative building. Anchorage public schools are struggling with a \$23 million budget gap. Anchorage School Board President Tami Agosti-Gisler, right, urged public school supporters to tell lawmakers to increase funding.

The Anchorage School District will cut 219 positions -- including administrators, support staff and classroom teachers -- next school year, Superintendent Ed Graff announced Tuesday. District administrators are working with a \$566 million operating budget for the 2014-2015 school year, \$23 million shy of the funds the district says it needs.

And the funding gap is expected to widen considerably, with an estimated budget gap of \$49 million in the 2015-2016 school year. The budget recommendation is the "best we can offer our students with limited resources," Graff said.

Cutting classroom teachers by 159 positions means an increase in the student-teacher ratio. The loss of 44 teacher positions is due to a decline in student enrollment, a trend that's projected to continue another year.

Graff said the district and the Anchorage School Board are still working through which schools will lose teachers. Before they start determining who will lose their jobs and what schools will lose instructors, the budget needs to be approved by the school board. The school board will deal with the budget twice in February, consider public feedback, and then work through staffing particulars.

The staffing process happens in April. Teachers on the chopping block should be informed of their termination in May, Graff said.

Balancing the budget is a challenge, he said, and the district's top priority is limiting the impact to students. Teachers have calmly weathered the storm over the past year or so, but worries bubble below the surface.

Graff said he went from classroom to classroom at the beginning of the school year and thanked teachers for sticking with it through some rough transitions, which included the swift departure of

the previous superintendent. As Graff handed a letter of thanks to one teacher, she began crying. She thought it was a notice of termination.

School Board President Tam Agosti-Gisler chimed in, adding that the budget woes are “a distraction for teachers.”

## **Unprecedented reductions**

While the conversation tends to focus on teachers and the potential impact to students, the district’s central administration faces the largest reduction.

Twenty percent of those jobs will disappear this year and next. Administrators manage the overall operations of schools, including cafeteria staff and building maintenance employees. They also oversee academic standards and try to ensure schools have the resources to meet those standards.

Ten specialty counseling positions will be cut of the budget proposal passes. Secondary counsellors will be pooled together and assigned based on student enrollment numbers and individual needs of schools. The recommendation came through during last year’s budget process but was avoided.

Over the past four years, the district has reduced its budget by eliminating the equivalent of 491 full-time positions, or roughly 718 employees. That total doesn’t include the more than 200 full-time equivalent positions slated for elimination during the coming school year.

The staff reductions are unlike anything Graff has seen in his 23 years with the district, he said.

“I believe any further reductions will jeopardize our momentum,” he said.

## **Goodbye to swimming**

To offset the loss of teachers and attempt to balance classroom sizes, the district is proposing shifting high schools from a six-period to seven-period schedule.

And the public has made it clear it wants the district to keep as many opportunities for students in place as possible. Graff dubbed the new approach as “Core plus more,” a play on the district’s implementation of Alaska Common Core Standards, a guideline of sorts of what students are expected to learn. The standards are similar to the nationwide Common Core Standards.

The addition of a seventh period will align middle and high school schedules. Middle school teachers currently teach for five of seven periods per day. Now they’ll teach six periods. The district is also proposing getting rid of one of two daily planning periods.

Graff said he believes teachers and support staff will do “everything in their ability to continue to provide learning experiences that meet the needs of every student.”

The only extracurricular classes Graff is proposing to cut next year, for now, are high school swimming classes.

“Swimming is not a required course, nor is there a swim test requirement for graduation,” he said. The cut shouldn’t impact after-school swimming and diving team activities and rentals.

## **Sustainable funding**

The district’s money troubles are the result of flat funding and rising health care costs.

The state’s Base Student Allocation (BSA), the number of dollars school districts receive per student, has remained steady at \$5,680 the last three years.

Funding shortfalls have been the new norm the past five years. A \$25 million budget deficit for the current school year was closed by spending some of the district’s budget reserves and making cuts to support staff and classroom supplies. Teaching positions were not included in the cuts for the 2012-2013 school year.

Agosti-Gisler said the board is calling all public education supporters to tell the state’s legislators about what they value in Anchorage’s public education system and urge them to increase the base allocation.

Graff said the district needs consistent, sustainable funding to keep the district afloat. “We’re a people-intensive business,” he said, a business that requires human resources to provide quality education. Still, in meetings with lawmakers, Graff said he hasn’t heard “comments as to what we need to do to secure funding.”

## **Soaring health care costs**

Rising health care costs dry up district dollars far more than salaries, and classroom supplies are a mere fraction of the funding total.

“There’s active medical and retiree medical,” said Mark Foster, the district’s chief financial officer. “Those are the two dominant factors in cost growth” over the past two decades. It’s not uncommon for employees’ health care costs to see increases in the double-digit percentages on an annual basis, he said.

Outside states have healthier, competitive prices when compared to Alaska. Foster said that 10 percent of Alaskans’ income went toward staying healthy around 1990. Now, 20 percent of their wealth is going into health care, he said.

“It’s not just that health care costs are rising everywhere; they’re rising in Alaska much faster,” Foster said.

The district is working with employee unions, trying to get them to pay a higher portion of the cost. Its teacher-compensation package is an ongoing point of contention for some educators, especially given the new demands and standards they are facing. Officials say their plans moving forward focus on improving performance in the classroom, a balancing act that means doing more with less.

A recent three-year agreement between the teachers’ union and district have helped contain some of the rising health care costs, Graff said.

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