

Fairbanks school district projects \$8 million budget shortfall

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FAIRBANKS — More than 200 people packed the multi-purpose room at Ryan Middle School on Thursday to hear from school district administrators how bad next year's budget would look. Though the news laid out by Superintendent Pete Lewis wasn't unexpected, it wasn't good for the district either.

The Fairbanks North Star Borough School District will face a budget shortfall of about \$8 million next fiscal year if the district's projections are accurate.

To balance its budget, the district plans to eliminate about 50 regular classroom teachers — 18 at the elementary school level, 12 at the middle school level and about 22 at the junior high school level.

The layoffs would cause class size increases for the second time in two years, a measure the district had previously touted as one it had been able to avoid for many years. Projections show average class sizes increasing from 24 to 25.5 in grades one through three.

Because the district has to be working on its 2015 budget so early, administrators don't know yet how much funding the state legislature or the borough assembly plan to provide. The district's budget proposal, which it released for the first time Thursday evening, assumes a \$100 increase per student to the Base Student Allocation from the state and an \$888,280 increase in the local contribution from the borough.

The \$100 BSA increase equates to about \$2.6 million; however, the district would not receive that much extra over next year because of enrollment reductions. Enrollment in FNSB schools has decreased by about 200 students from last year.

The district requests the additional funding from the borough to offset losses of state funding because of property value increases. The borough's last full value determination increased by \$335 million, which means the state will reduce its contribution to the school district by \$888,280.

Despite the additional funding factored into the district's proposal, the increases are not certain. The state legislature has not increased the BSA in four years.

Gov. Sean Parnell proposed a BSA increase of \$85 per student as part of his omnibus education bill this session, but if the bill passes with its present number, the district would have to plan for about \$400,000 less from the state. That would mean state funding to FNSBSD would stay essentially the same from the year prior.

If no BSA increase at all makes it through the legislature, the district stands to have a budget shortfall of about \$2.6 million greater than what it already has projected.

Lewis called on all those present Thursday to express their concern to their legislators.

“We need your help. We need you to really kind of take on that ambassador role,” Lewis said. “Can you reach out to the state Legislature? Can you reach out to the governor? Can you ask yourself what you want for your kids, what you want for your neighbor’s kids, what you want for your future?”

Lewis stressed the fact that, even though Fairbanks has been one of the most successful districts in the state, if it keeps having to increase class sizes and cut teachers the effects will catch up to it as they have in other places.

“As we perform well, you will hear sometimes the argument ... ‘It’s not you, it’s someone else,’” Lewis said. “The point is, at some point, it is going to be us because resources, the allocation of those resources ... is going to tip the scale.”

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