

Juneau schools look to cut \$4.8M

Public says new curriculum not needed, save class sizes

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The Juneau School District is starting to get a clearer picture of next year's financial standing now that the two biggest fiscal unknowns — the cost of its teachers and state funding availability — have dollar figures attached.

But for a district facing nearly \$4.8 million in budget cuts, clearer does not mean easier, JSD Superintendent Glenn Gelbrich said after a budget committee meeting Tuesday evening.

"There's still such a large gap between what we want to provide for students and what we can afford to provide," Gelbrich told the Empire.

The school board's budget committee will be working to cut the full \$4.8 million from the budget because the status of a funding increase of about \$900,000 will not be known by the time the district's budget is due to the City and Borough Juneau.

"There's still sufficient ambiguity — we're still very early in the legislative session," Gelbrich said. "We'll plan for what we know, and we don't know if we'll have the (base student allocation) increased or not."

He added that the committee and school board will develop a plan or priority list of items to be reinstated first if the budget gap ends up being less than the projected amount when the budget is sent to the CBJ for final approval.

Three weeks ago, Juneau schools were facing a \$3.1 million shortfall as work began on next year's budget, but that number ballooned last week to \$4.5 million after the new teachers' contract was estimated to have a \$1.3 million impact. The bump to \$4.8 million is a result of the district's tentative agreement with the teachers costing an estimated \$230,000 more than anticipated a week ago. The tentative agreement is expected to be approved by the board and full teachers union.

"They're comfortable with what we've got, and we're comfortable, too," Gelbrich said of union negotiations while guest speaking at a Rotary Club of Juneau luncheon earlier on Tuesday.

Tuesday night's committee meeting was the first in which the committee heard comments from the public, and the forum focused almost exclusively on one topic: the district's proposal to spend more than \$1 million on new curriculum. The proposal includes nearly \$600,000 on a new elementary language arts curriculum and about \$500,000 on a new secondary math program.

Seven or eight people who spoke at the meeting, including Juneau teachers and parents, said the district should not be purchasing new curriculum that may not work as hoped when there are other more pressing needs.

"If we can't afford smaller class sizes, we shouldn't be buying new books," said Juneau teacher Amy Jo Meiners.

"Those programs don't teach children to read. Teachers teach children to read, and they have their own ways of doing that," added Karen Doxey, a Riverbend Elementary School teacher.

Gelbrich defended the cost by pointing to a different number: the percentage of students who are not meeting literacy and math standards.

"The 35-to-40 percent, by far, overshadow the budget number to me," Gelbrich said. "That's not to undervalue the question before the committee, but I'm really, really worried about the 35-to-40 percent."

Several members of the budget committee voiced support for the notion of waiting a year or more to purchase new curriculum so school officials could be sure that the \$1.1 million investment would directly lead to improved student success.

"If we spend money on this curriculum and cut teachers, we're taking a real gamble," said Jennifer Lindley, one of the budget committee members. "What happens if curriculum doesn't give us the results we're seeking? Now we've hurt our community."

If the district were to invest the same amount of money in teaching positions, there would be 10 fewer positions cut, Gelbrich said in answer to a question on the matter.

"Losing teachers in lieu of a new curriculum seems like a huge risk right now," Lindley said.

The idea of reducing the number of teaching positions to be cut instead of proposing the new curriculum was discussed prior to the district proposing the first draft of next year's budget, said Gelbrich, who added that school principals and the district-level staff view the update as "extremely important."

"We brought it forward knowing the costs," he said.

The most common concern expressed Tuesday night about the proposed budget was the implications reducing teaching positions would have on class sizes, particularly at the elementary level.

"We cannot balance the budget on the backs of our 6-year-olds," said Marie Marks, a parent of two JSD students and a member of the Dzantik'i Heeni Middle School site council.

Aside from removing the curriculum upgrades from the budget, several members of the public and committee pointed to the six instructional coach positions as possible cuts to prevent elementary-level class sizes from increasing.

"Let's get our priorities straight, and keep our priority in funding classroom teachers," Carrie Macaulay said in an email to the budget committee.

In that email, she proposed reducing the number of instructional coaches from six to three and having the coaches each handle two schools.

The district considered cutting the instructional coaches program but didn't believe it could be effective if cut, Gelbrich said.

"We consider instructional coaches an essential part of our plan in developing our teachers," he said.

The committee's next meeting will be next Tuesday at 6 p.m. in the DHMS commons.

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