

Detroit schools to cut 3,200 jobs

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Detroit Public Schools officials announced Thursday the district would lay off 3,200 school employees, including 900 teachers, by July 1. The job cuts, which amount to 13 percent of the workforce, are in response to a budget shortfall of \$78 million last year and a projected deficit of \$91 million in 2005, officials say.

The cuts in the \$1.5 billion budget follow an announcement last month that an additional 450 administrators could lose their jobs. The district, which already faces chronic overcrowding in the classrooms, also plans to shut at least three schools, in addition to the 16 closed or consolidated last year. The budget for supplies and purchased services will be cut by more than one-third to save \$50 million, with funding for playground improvements slashed from \$1 million to \$250,000.

The layoffs will wreak havoc, particularly for teachers who are already short-handed and stretched to the limit. "You could see a gym teacher who is certified in kindergarten through six grade become a homeroom teacher, or an instrumental teacher might have to go back to the classroom," district spokesman Mario Morrow said.

Kenneth Burnley, CEO of the Detroit Public Schools, said he also plans to renegotiate the district's contract with the Detroit Federation of Teachers in order reduce or eliminate 3-4 percent annual raises that teachers are due.

The 151,000-student school district—the largest in the state—has been hit hard by federal and state budget cuts, the ongoing loss of manufacturing jobs and tax revenue in Michigan, rising fuel costs and a decline in enrollment. Over the last eight years nearly 30,000 students have transferred to charter, private and suburban schools. Ninety percent of the remaining students are African-American, with more than 7 out of 10 students coming from families living below the official poverty level.

Facing a \$1 billion state deficit, Michigan's Democratic governor Jennifer Granholm and the state legislature are cutting per-pupil grants for K-12 education by \$55 per student and revising the formula for counting pupils in schools, in order to slash another \$43 million from state spending for schools. In the proposed state budget, Detroit could also lose another \$15 million it has been receiving since the state took over the district in 1999. On Wednesday the state senate also rejected a plan that would have given extra money to districts with declining enrollments.

Because of stagnating or falling revenue school districts throughout Michigan are facing budget cuts and layoffs. According to Tom White, executive director of the Michigan School Business officials, 90 percent of state districts are planning to lay off staff or not fill open positions. "It's like getting squeezed by a python," he said, the "pressure just is increasing as time goes by. It is going to get ugly and I don't hear a great deal of concern being raised in [the state capital] Lansing."

Like other districts nationwide, Detroit schools are also threatened by the provisions of the Bush administration's 2001 federal education plan, the so-called No Child Left Behind Act, which removes federal funds if districts fail to achieve specific academic goals. One quarter of the district's schools have already been warned they must overhaul their operations because of "chronic failure." The school district received a federal reading grant of nearly \$6.5 million in August but continued funding hinges on 1st-through-8th and 10th-graders passing tests at the end of the school year. The budget cutbacks announced Thursday all but ensure future failures, guaranteeing even more devastating budget cuts.

"We don't need any more cuts," said Mary, a longtime Detroit school bus driver. "What is going to happen to the kids with special needs, the disabled and

impaired students? We heard they plan to take away the bus attendants that help us in the busses with handicapped students. This is outrageous.

“The conditions are already unbearable in the schools. Buildings are falling apart, there is no toilet paper or soap in the bathrooms, the classrooms are overcrowded and the teachers are spending money out of their own pockets for supplies. These budget cuts are taking the future away from our kids. With the casinos downtown making millions and CEOs are raking it in how can they say there is no money for schools?

“You know the economy is way down when you start taking away from schools that are already hurting. How can you talk about ‘No Child Left Behind’ when you are laying off teachers?”



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