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Wednesday, November 26, 2008

Schools asked to tighten budget further

By Justin Vick
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Superintendent Barry Shepherd met with the Cabarrus County Board of Education Thursday to begin identifying where Cabarrus County Schools could cut \$1.1 million from its already lean budget.

The district already trimmed more than \$1 million this fall after enrollment figures fell short of projections. And this series of cuts may only come from state allocations, which exclude construction, maintenance and state lottery funding.

"This second round of cuts is going to be difficult for our district to absorb due to the limited funds provided to us by the state," Shepherd said, noting Cabarrus County Schools is the second lowest state-funded school district in North Carolina.

"What makes it difficult about our budget is we are probably 75 to 80 percent staff," added chief financial officer Kelly Klutz. "When you're stretching your budget and trying to find things to cut and you want to protect people and jobs, it's extremely difficult."

Klutz outlined a number of cost-cutting strategies.

The largest amount, \$484,000, would come from a 10 percent budget reduction of instructional supplies and materials for schools and system-level departments.

- Other adjustments include returning:
- \$115,000 for computer equipment used by career-tech, disadvantaged and gifted programs;
 - \$100,000 for summer school for middle school students;
 - \$96,503 for the replacement of textbooks;
 - \$75,566 for staff development, starting with out-of-state travel; and
 - \$50,000 for substitute teachers and supplies for disadvantaged students.

Several board members expressed concern about the prospect of reducing instructional supplies, materials and textbooks.

"Our classrooms are short already," said board member Lynn Shue. "I hope we can find a way to reduce reversions when it comes to (those areas)."

Retired principal Wayne Williams said he hoped the school system would also preserve as much of the in-house staff development as possible. Shepherd said he was open to that, but cautioned such training also incurs costs of hiring substitutes in teachers' absence.

Board members seemed to gravitate to other ideas involving the reduction of overtime among clerical and custodial staff, as well as slashing utility costs.

Cabarrus County Schools could save an additional \$15,000 savings in utilities if it were to shut down all of its buildings on Dec. 23, Klutz said. Board member Cindy Fertenbaugh suggested the system look into shutting down schools during the weekends or increase weekend rental fees.

Administrators will bring a final list of recommendations for the school board to consider during its Dec. 6 meeting. School systems have until Dec. 19 to identify cost cutting measures to the N.C. Department of Public Instruction.

NCDPI sent a memo to superintendents early last week telling them to return \$39.25 per student based on first-month enrollment averages.

A spokeswoman with the department told the Independent Tribune that all state agencies were asked to make budget cuts. And while the N.C. Department of Public Instruction was to make \$117 million in reversions, it chiseled \$59 million of that before having to ask school systems to make cuts, said the spokeswoman.

"Other government agencies are told to expect another round of cuts by the first of the calendar year," Shepherd said. "They haven't conveyed it to public schools, but we're prepared in our thinking to be ahead. A third round of cuts this year would be serious, and it would affect the classroom."

• Contact reporter Justin Vick: 704-789-9138.



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