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Budget plan tests school budgets

Superintendents see cuts in programs, staff if state trims aid

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ALBANY -- For the second year in a row, school superintendents are looking for ways to slash their budgets after Gov. David Paterson proposed more than \$1 billion in cuts to education aid.

The 5 percent cut under the governor's budget has been widely attacked by superintendents and education advocates since it was announced Tuesday. Total school aid in the 2010-11 school year is set at \$20.5 billion, down from \$21.6 billion.

"This is beyond what we've ever imagined," said Albany schools interim superintendent Raymond Colucciello. "The state's trying to put people to work and we're going to take 100 people and put them on the street."

Colucciello said Paterson's plan will mean cuts far greater than the 100 positions expected to be trimmed before next fall.

He called the \$6.8 million reduction in state aid for Albany "historic" and said it will likely mean program cuts and could result in a school building closure.

Schools have been anticipating less money, although the deep cuts proposed by Paterson were unexpected. Cuts last year were reduced by federal stimulus dollars, but the relief won't rescue budgets this year because it has been built into the 2010-11 proposal. Layoffs, program reductions, building closures and the revisiting of union contracts are all on the table, education officials said.

Education advocates Alliance for Quality Education and the Campaign for Fiscal Equity held a rally at the Legislative Office Building on Wednesday. Protesters broke pencils to symbolize the governor's broken promises to students.

"The governor's proposed budget represents a colossal reversal of New York state's commitment to providing every child with a real opportunity to learn," said Billy Easton, executive director of the alliance.

Not everyone agrees the cuts are unfair.

School spending has outpaced inflation over the past decade, said Edmund J. McMahon, director of the Empire Center for New York State Policy, a research group

that favors less government spending. He said districts should consider freezing teacher salaries and slammed Paterson for not providing districts with the tools to reduce spending.

"A lot of these districts haven't been fiscally restrained," he said. "Still, it's hard to throw the car in reverse when you're on the expressway."

In Troy, officials are struggling with a proposed \$2.5 million drop, about double what was anticipated. It's too early to tell how the district will react, spokeswoman Caroline Boardman said Wednesday, but all department heads will spend the next week looking at places to trim.

In Shenendehowa, the suburban Saratoga County district will attempt to form its 2010-11 budget with about \$4.4 million less in state aid. Superintendent Oliver Robinson criticized the governor for not dipping into the state's rainy day fund to stave off local cuts. He said less aid will almost certainly mean more staff reductions on top of the 46 positions eliminated last year.

"The strength and future prosperity of the state of New York hinges largely on the quality of its schools," Robinson said, adding the proposal puts the future into jeopardy and places a significant burden on property taxpayers across the state.

Guilderland Superintendent John McGuire said program and staff reductions are inevitable after \$1.7 million in aid was cut. He said the state plan is far worse than projections and because school officials were not willing to raise property taxes, layoffs were almost certain.

"You just don't make this up in supplies and materials," McGuire said.

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Reduction proposal

Proposed school aid cuts, including building aid:

Albany: \$6.8 million, 7.8 percent

Ballston Spa: \$2.5 million, 9.21 percent

Berne-Knox-Westerlo: \$1.2 million, 13.2 percent

Bethlehem: \$3.7 million, 12.2 percent

East Greenbush: \$200,000, 0.7 percent

Guilderland: \$1.7 million, 7.2 percent

Lansingburgh: \$778,000, 3.2 percent

North Colonie: \$1.8 million, 9.2 percent

Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk: \$1.1 million, 6.5 percent

Saratoga Springs: \$3.1 million, 9.5 percent

Schenectady: \$5.5 million, 5.6 percent

South Colonie: \$3.7 million, 15.1 percent

Troy: \$2.5 million, 4.8 percent

Voorheesville: \$475,000, 8.14 percent